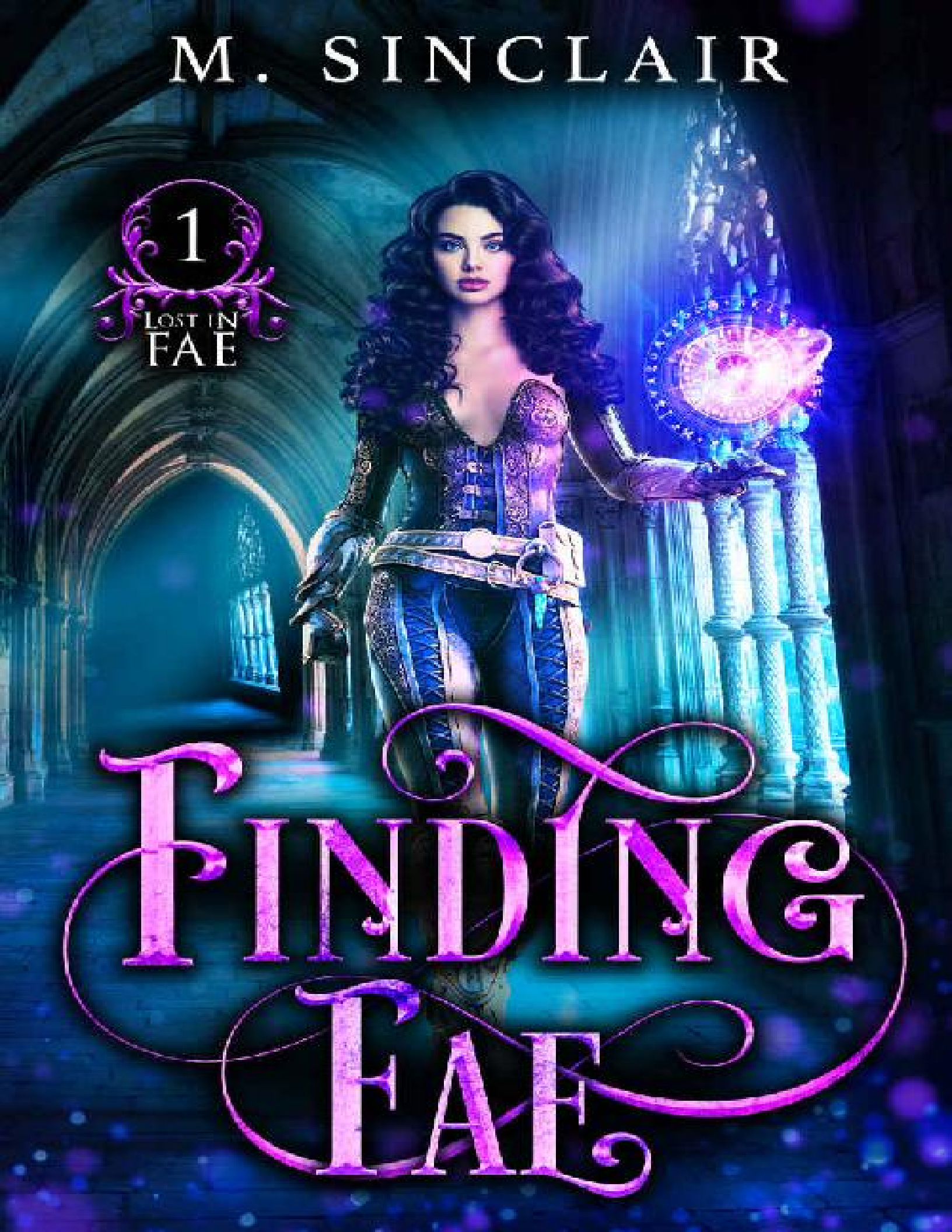
M. SINCLAIR
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LOST IN FAE
FINDING FAE

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The Union of Love & Madness

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Description

My name is Maize.

Poisonous to the touch.

The bastard child of one very dead Dark Fae King.

A refugee of a war that freed me from my three-year imprisonment.

Loyal to a kingdom that absolutely despises who I am.

I was free. As free as someone like me could be, at least. At 22, I could go anywhere. Travel any realm. Yet, I chose to stay in the kingdom that saved me. I was loyal to a fault and now after a full year spent living within the castle walls, I was being transferred to the Red Masques academy. Not as a student. Not as a teacher either. I honestly wasn't positive why I was going… *a change of pace?* Or maybe they had grown tired of me in the castle. Either way, I would be staying with the team of commanders that are in charge of the institution. It couldn't be that bad right?

Well, that was what I assumed before I met the men I would be living with. Yeah, not positive how this is going to work out…stay tuned.

Finding Fae is book 1 in the ***Lost In Fae series***. This PNR/Fantasy RH is part of an M. Sinclair universe but can be read as a standalone series (*feel free to check out the others as well for a more encompassing universe understanding and cameos*). Prepare yourself for a strong, but haunted FMC that meets men that may be the best or worst thing for her. Undetermined.

Book will contain swearing. As well, please be advised that the book contains darker themes including assault, PTSD, and violence. Additionally, sexual themes are suitable for mature audiences +18. Burn level - slow/medium.

Chapter 1

Maize

February

I curled my nails into my palms, pressing so hard that I felt them break skin, the scent of blood filling the space around me. I swallowed trying to keep myself together as I inhaled sharply, my body aching and radiating pain. Phantom torture pulsed through me as mercury-like tears stained my face from where I hid in my room, away from the rest of the castle.

I had been like this all night.

I'd been in pain like this since I woke from a nightmare so horrible and vivid that it could only be a memory. A whimper broke from my lips as I resisted the urge to not hit my head into the wall just to stop the pain, even for a second. You would never guess that I spent my nights like this. Not if you knew me like everyone else in this castle did.

Cold.

Controlled.

Calm.

Not whimpering with tears staining my face as I felt the memory of electric torture from my father's magic and the leather boots of Dark Fae soldiers kicking and stepping on my broken form. I had physically healed. *I didn't feel healed though.* Even after all this time, I could still remember every single moment of my years in imprisonment. I didn't think I would ever be completely whole again, the trauma I had been put through for three fucking years of my life like a nasty scar. As if I didn't have enough of those already.

I had no idea how long I stayed like that, curled in on myself reliving the pain of being held captive for the past three years. I had thought I would die there. I had thought they would eventually push my body far enough that I would die. I hadn't though.

When the cold winter sun finally arched over my heavy glass window hours later, the shadows receded and I let out a small unsteady breath. My sobbing lessened and my body unlocked. The sun proving that I was in fact no longer locked down in the dungeons. I climbed towards the window feeling exhausted as my mind raced, my face pressed to the cold glass as

the sun slowly heated it. I let out a shaky breath and closed my eyes, praying that the nightmares wouldn’t return. Hoping that I could get some sleep. Even an hour.

When a sharp knock sounded what felt like a minute later, I opened my blurry eyes and stood to realize it was nearly midafternoon, if I could believe the sunlight that blinded me. I called out, *"just a moment,"* and walked over to my attached bathroom splashing my face with water. Looking up I grimaced, *I looked awful*. I shook my head and tugged a sweater over my tank top wondering who the hell was bothering me.

We all knew that I was no longer doing Supernatural Enforcement training, the kingdom’s official military unit, so technically I shouldn’t be needed. *Yeah*. That happened. Apparently, I was too much of a trigger because I was a Dark Fae so instead I was being shipped off to the Red Masques academy today. It had always been the plan, Gray informing me nearly a year ago of the possible change of location, but I still wasn’t a huge fan. No one fully enjoyed a change that they weren’t choosing for themselves.

Opening the door, I felt myself soften slightly, looking into a familiar pair of fuschia eyes. I knew the man could literally appear in my room but it made me happy that he respected me enough to knock. I stepped back and let him in. Despite my attempts to push him away, Chait had buried himself in my broken and empty heart, making me actually care about him. Care about our friendship. Well him, as well as another Red Masques commander that was no doubt expected to join us. The two of them were attached at the hip. I closed the door but didn’t lock it as Chait fixed me with a concerned look. He never mentioned it because I essentially shut it down immediately, but I was almost positive he knew about my nightmares. I wasn’t positive how, considering he lived completely across the kingdom, but then again the man seemed to know a lot of odd shit like that.

“Have you been crying?” he asked softly, his voice smooth and tinged with concern.

“No,” I waved him off with a small smile and sat down on a velvet couch that was near a constantly lit fireplace.

Chait watched me for a moment before looking towards the door. I used my enhanced hearing to listen to the sound of expensive boots making their way down the hallway. I tried to not let panic override me. Footsteps still made me uncomfortable because it usually meant something bad was

coming. I was worried I would violently lash out. Worried I would do something I would regret one of these days. I looked over Chait, trying to distract myself which was fairly easy considering how freakin' stunning he was to look at.

Chait's dark hair, a shock of curls on top with short almost shaved sides, shimmered with fuschia wave-like streaks due to his magic. The effect had me shivering as his hazy magic wrapped around me, subconsciously no doubt, the spicy and exotic scent matching the lazy sensual man himself. Although, even those descriptors didn't match him very well because the man had a depth that felt like an endless foggy lane. You know those dreams where you just keep walking? Never finding the end? That was how it felt to be wrapped up in his magic. I examined his golden skin, and as usual, got stuck on his ears that were far more pointed than a fae's would be.

I knew why. It was something he rarely talked about. Something he was ashamed of. It was why it confused me that he had admitted being part Dark Fae and part Elven to me. I was glad he had, but I wasn't positive why he felt the need to explain himself to me. Maybe because of the Dark Fae element? Or maybe because of his constant journey to get me to open up as well? It didn't really matter because while he may not realize it, that type of trust had meant a lot to me. I hated to imagine what it was like growing up in the Elven realm. The Dark Fae Kingdom had been terrible no doubt, but nothing compared to the cesspool of disgusting shit the elves did in their spare time. Which was constant because the entire kingdom lived in absolute reckless spirit.

Plus, I actually rather liked Chait's ears despite him not enjoying them.

I had a feeling his childhood was no better than mine. I recognized the pain that flashed in those oddly colored, thickly lashed, eyes. While he was leaner and shorter than some of the other men I knew, at 5'11, there was no doubt he was a warrior. Even though he wore an oversized hoodie and jeans today, I knew there were a ridiculous amount of muscles and tattoos underneath his casual Earth realm clothes. Such a contrast to the dark stone room around us that bore both modern and medieval-like amenities.

The Horde was odd like that. One of three kingdoms within the Fae realm, it seemed to be stuck in an odd transition phase of the old and new. We had fairly easy access to the Earth realm so you often saw people in everything from full armor to hoodies. I had never been to the Earth realm

but those I had met seemed…interesting to say the least. I was hoping this advancement traveled across borders into the Dark Fae kingdom. That place needed a ton of work.

My eyes snapped away from the ridiculous amount of piercings Chait had as the door opened. *What?* It was insanely hard to not look and stare at the man, he had silver piercings everywhere, covering each ear, lip, and eyebrow. So many small little piercings. It was addictive. I honestly wondered where else he had piercings...

Maddox opened the door and stepped in, my heart warming at the sight of the man. See I wasn't completely heartless? These men proved it. I had never met the rest of their Red Masques command squad and I tried to not consider that it was purposeful, but a year was a long time. Maybe they just figured they would wait until I got transferred since we'd been aware of it most likely happening? Or maybe not. Maybe they didn't want me to meet them. I had no fucking idea. I suppose it didn't matter since I would not only be meeting them but living with them as well.

I did take solace in the fact that I would know two of the men I would live near at least. Two men that I could admit to trusting. Something that I thought would be impossible for me considering every person that had ever been close to me had hurt me in some way. I know, fucking peachy right?

Maybe this would be the new start I needed?

As mentioned, a lot was changing around here and I could only hope that the hatred of the Dark Fae would lessen over time. Although in some ways the Fae land itself breeds competition and enemies. The realm split into massive geographical sections that consisted of the Light Fae realm, Dark Fae realm, and the Horde. The Horde was my current residence and was ruled by Queen Gray.

Somewhere around twenty years ago, my asshole father had killed Queen Gray's parents and had attempted to kill Gray herself on her 6th birthday. *I know, I was shocked she didn't hate me because of that alone.* While her brother served in her place as the Horde's leader, Gray had run to the Earth realm. The Horde had thought her dead or missing and after two decades, no one had expected her to return. When she did, taking her place as the True Heir with a fantastic taste in shoes, I had to admit, everyone was shocked.

So she and my father waged war. I'd heard the Dark Fae soldiers talking about it and frankly was unsurprised when the Horde took over the castle,

freeing me in the process. My father's military was average, at best. I would never forget that day. Never forget the moment that I realized I would be free.

She had also killed my father, which I was only disappointed about a tad bit because I'd craved to kill him myself. Gray had ripped out his heart and I approved of the tactic. Honestly, I had celebrated his death and being freed from the imprisonment that I'd been placed into at the age of eighteen. Why, you ask? At eighteen I had become powerful enough to not only become a threat to my father, who knew of my dislike of literally everything about him, but also was juiced up enough that he could drain magic from me like every other adult in the kingdom.

My family was perfect, right?

Following that, the war had begun right around then and I'd met Chait and Maddox. Queen Gray had brought me to her castle, despite others' protests due to my heritage and let me heal there. After over a year, I had not only physically healed but tried to show my devotion to the kingdom that saved me by serving in Supernatural Enforcement. Unfortunately, not only was I still considered the enemy to most, but also a woman. Yeah. We were still working on that pesky sexism shit in the Fae lands.

I had finally begun getting used to all of this. Now, I would have to readapt. If it hadn't been Gray's suggestion I would have probably said no. I knew she was concerned about how the SE was treating me and I didn't feel as though I had a right to disagree with her. Hell, I wouldn't be living anywhere but in a dungeon, if it wasn't for her.

So now I was going to the Red Masques academy, the starting point of a special operations private militia that Queen Gray's sister, Vegas, and her fiancés were not only part of but started. My half brother, Bandit, was part of their team and thankfully the True Heir of the god awful kingdom I'd been raised and tortured in. *He could fucking have it.* I would rather stay in the Horde, even if I had to live in a damn alleyway at this point. As you can imagine, I wasn't exactly very picky considering my situation.

"Maize." Maddox's neon eyes met mine and I was struck by their brilliance. So much color. So much brightness. It was like a drug trip to someone who had spent three years in a dungeon.

"Morning," I offered a soft smile as he dipped his head and pressed a kiss to my forehead. My stomach tightened at his proximity as I tried to

stuff down the feelings that had slowly been making themselves known, whether I was okay with it or not.

“You look tired,” he admitted, sitting as Chait joined us on the couch.

I offered a small smile but avoided answering. “So when do I move today?” Maddox narrowed his eyes at me, no doubt unimpressed by my attempt.

“Tonight, not during the day,” Chait admitted, “we didn’t want to distract the students.”

Yes. Because I was quite distracting to look at and not in a positive way.

“What am I going to be doing there?” I asked, feeling anxiety buckle my chest.

“We aren’t exactly sure,” Maddox grunted. *Wonderful*. I tried to not get distracted by Maddox, but as I stated, it was getting more difficult around both of them. His scent was Fae but not completely…no, he was more than that. I couldn’t tell you what. The two of them were somewhat of a mystery if we were being honest. I looked over his massive 6'5 build that was made of cut and lean muscle. Made me feel like he could do some serious damage considering the absolutely unhinged light to his eyes that rested right below his relaxed, but somehow commanding personality. The man was confusing as hell.

“Cannon is probably going to have a fit when they tell him you’ve arrived,” Chait admitted softly as Maddox messed up his own crimson hair and closed his vibrant neon green eyes, lessening the dizzying effect he had on me. Not much though. Both of them made me want to crawl across their laps, and trust me, I’ve never had that thought before.

This afternoon he wore a pair of dark black jeans that sat below a muscled cut V of his hot as hell body. His shoulders were covered in an open military jacket that had tiny little teacup buttons. The man had runes that ran across the side of his face from temple to jaw. He was absolutely lethal.

I found him far more attractive because of it. I think it was because I felt like both Chait and Maddox could hold their own next to me. They weren’t scared of me or my magic and because of that, I found myself trusting them. I also found it funny how many people were scared of them, specifically some of the SE assholes that had made my life a bit of hell during training.

“He doesn’t want me there,” I stated factually.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Maddox inhaled and muttered, “I think he has forgotten you are arriving. I think you will find that our team's reaction to you may be a bit…intense.”

“Why?”

Chait offered me a gentle hand squeeze. “It’s just a hunch. You just deliver quite a punch Maize.”

I laughed softly but it was sad and stressed, I stood and walked towards my bathroom. “Do you mind if I get ready really quick? I’m guessing you want to go get lunch?”

“Actually we can’t stay,” Maddox admitted as he stood and approached me, he placed his fingers underneath my chin.

“Why?” I asked, trying to not sound like a kicked fucking puppy.

“We have to prepare a few things,” Chait admitted, appearing behind me and pressing a kiss to my shoulder. I nodded, sighing slightly and relaxing into their touch. The *only* two men, and people, really allowed to touch me, truth be told. After a moment and a goodbye, they left, and I tried to not let pain sever my heart. That was the issue with those men. I’d tried to push them away, but I just found myself getting more and more addicted.

Some days I wondered if I should just leave. Leave the Horde. Leave the Fae lands. Just leave. You can’t blame me completely. After nearly a year living in Queen Gray’s castle and attempting to fit in with a nation that hates you? Let’s just say it was exhausting. More so now that I had to move to the Red Masques academy. I really didn’t want to explain myself to another group of pricks.

Walking into the bathroom I examined my pale face. At twenty-two, I was, of course, a very young fae, but I didn’t feel that way, I felt far older. Far more tired. Some days I wondered how I hadn’t been here longer than the ground beneath my feet. Other days that same thought process urged me to not waste time and instead, explore the world around me. This universe that the cosmos god had drafted, like a messy drawing, consisted of infinite amounts of realms with fascinating creatures and even more fascinating experiences. So why the hell was I not exploring them? Well, the loyalty I felt towards the Horde was steadfast and I figured that since I most likely wouldn’t even be alive without them…I could wait for vacation time. *Right?*

It wasn’t like I could really build a life anywhere. It wasn’t like I could interact with people for an extended amount of time safely. I’d killed so

many guards in self-defense and half of it had been purely my magic. I didn't trust it. I didn't trust myself. Mind you, they had been threatening me…but still. It took being around Chait and Maddox for almost nine months before I was comfortable touching them without worrying I would kill them.

I wasn't being dramatic either. I was pure Dark Fae, an heir from the Dark Fae king. Not only was I poisonous, my wings especially…but I had the ridiculous need to feed on the life and energy of others. It was a dangerous thing. I was worse than a succubus and no one really understood where these powers had come from since my father, nor my mother had them. Yet, somehow despite my inclination to be antisocial and introverted, possibly moving to an island or deserted realm to be at peace…I wanted to serve and show Queen Gray my devotion. My gratitude. Plus, as stated before, I needed others to survive. Literally, I needed to be around a large number of people. It was why I had been so weak when my asshole father had kept me locked in that dungeon.

I know, I was poisonous and fed on other people's life forces. *I was a fucking keeper.*

Removing my clothes, I tucked a piece of dark hair behind my ear and turned on the bathtub, the water filling slowly. I walked back into my room, locked the door and grabbed a cigarette that I'd been introduced to by several of the supernatural guardsmen. I didn't smoke often but I had to admit it relaxed me. Apparently, smoking was terrible for humans but I hadn't had issues with it so far. Sinking into the bathtub, I lit it on a small candle nearby and closed my eyes, inhaling.

I would never not appreciate a warm bath. I had been stuck in a ragged nightgown for the past few years, dirty and disgusting. When I'd first taken a bath after being rescued I'd had to drain and refill the bath several times until I was clean. It was why I'd cut my hair short. That night I'd literally taken my hair, twisted it and cut it with a sword, so it laid around my shoulders. It was so relieving. I tilted my head back, blowing out smoke, as I thought back to nearly over a year ago when everything changed for me.

December: One Year Ago
The Year of My Liberation

Screams of death reached my ears and the ashy taste of the Horde Queen's magic met my tongue. I could feel the angry, searing energy from the sorceress upstairs, yet I saw nothing but the cold stone around me. Cold, wet stone that vibrated with the sick, sad energy of those that King Mario had drained, just like myself. Nothing says father-daughter bonding like draining my magic, right? Except, I simply re-energized, unlike the corpses scattered around the tomb-like cages that lined this dungeon. I inhaled as the cold damp air filtered through my senses and had me nearly letting out a ragged cough.

I'd grown numb to the pain, but it was still there. It was bad enough right now that a cold, silver tear dropped down my cheek and slid onto the floor. The mercury-like texture spread out and then fell into the cracks of the flooring. If you could call it that. My skin was frozen like an ice cube and my wings were pinched behind me, painfully. I think I was becoming more stone than truly a woman.

Still, pure unadulterated hope spiked through me. *I was going to be free*. Mario was going to die and I was going to be free. The Fae realm that I called home was changing and I could feel the ground shift dangerously, a new magic releasing itself in response to the true heir to the Horde. I had listened, solemnly, as her and the sorceress, goaded Mario for weeks on end and I was a bit jealous. Of their bond. Of the men they talked about that clearly loved them. Of their strength and clear solidarity as not only friends but sisters. I had no one except a soon to be dead father and half-brother. No home. Nothing.

I was clearly a very optimistic person if you hadn't caught on.

"Pretty little bug," a voice growled, causing my stomach to clench as bile rose in my throat. As a pureblood fae, a creature existed inside of me that was terribly dangerous and savage, waiting to exact its revenge. Despite my situation, literally trapped and cornered, I snarled aggressively. I wanted to kill them. The two large looming figures didn't scare me, but they infuriated me. They couldn't touch me, besides random kicks to the ribs. The smell of blood and body odor surrounded them making me curl back slightly.

"Leave me alone," I snapped with a growl. They couldn't touch me, not enough to do actual damage - that was reserved for my father, clearly. Unless, they were going to die anyway… The monster inside of me inflated with hatred and disgust as it let out an internal frustrated scream at our

treatment. You would have thought after all these years I would have given up. *I had not.* I was disappointed that I wouldn't get to kill the piece of shit that was my father myself, but there were other people to kill. Other people who had hurt me.

Both their eyes crawled over my exposed skin, a torn slip the only thing covering me. The iron shackles against my ankles and wrists held me against iron poles that had burned my back again and again. I couldn't move from my position or even try to stand.

"This is how I figure it," one of them mused, his hair a greasy almost green color, "if I am going to die, I may as well die doing something I enjoy."

My wings fluttered against my skin, their beauty never scarred from the iron. When they weren't in use, they wrapped around my ribs. Right now though, I was defensive so they were out and dangerous, despite them being pinched in this uncomfortable as hell position.

One of the men lunged forward to grab my neck and immediately my magic wrapped around him, causing a strangled sound to come from his throat. Within a second, he dropped dead and I had a moment of surprise at just how my powers had grown despite captivity.

When I had been living freely in the castle, up until three years ago I had been strong…but not like this. Now it felt like I had a well of power reserved behind me. I still couldn't always work through something like gloves, but skin to skin, I was golden. That's why they got such a kick out of kicking me with their boots. I was glad my father had stopped them from doing anything sexual…I could handle a lot of things, but rape? Having my control literally ripped from me? Fuck. I wasn't positive if I would ever recover from that.

"I'll fucking kill you," I warned the other with a snarl and bared teeth, "Lay a hand on me and see if I'm lying." I think somewhere along the way I had started losing sections of my humanity, or maybe I had never had it. Imprisonment brought out the most basic level in people and I was there. I was at rock-fucking-bottom.

Fury pulsed across his face, but then suddenly, it didn't matter. A pair of hands snapped the neck of the large man in front of me before the individual twisted it off and sprayed blood across my face. I let out, not that I'd ever admit to it, a tiny whimper at the blood-soaked man in front of me. He drew a hand across his face and smiled, picking up the head.

I must have made a noise because his head snapped to me in surprise.

“Oh, hey there,” he tilted his head, looking at my blood-soaked face, “sorry about that, little one, didn’t mean to spray all over you.”

“All good,” I stated in an attempted dry tone, because I was still chained up. The man frowned and knelt, immediately I shook my head.

“You can’t touch me, my skin is…” The man didn’t even let me finish before shouting for someone. A man with dark red hair appeared as he looked at me in surprise. They had to be around my age or slightly older and I could smell fire magic from the sorceress above all over them. I would bet they were hers.

“Shit,” the other frowned, “can she not move?”

I scowled at that. No shit. The blood-covered man spoke, “Chained up with iron, can’t touch her though.”

The metal mage, whom I recognized him as now, spoke, “Don’t worry, we are going to get you out of here. My name is Grover and this is Blue.”

I nodded without saying a word, I wasn’t sure what I’d say. I felt cautious but also thankful because I needed them off me. Now. They called for someone else and the blood-covered one, Blue, looked down at me. “What’s your name?”

I inhaled and spoke the name my mother had given me right before my father killed her.

“Maize.”

Present Day

I shook myself from the thought and a well of gratitude pulsed through me. How could I think of leaving the Horde when I owed Gray so much? I stood up from the tub as water dripped down my lean form. I wrapped myself in a towel and slowly brushed out my hair, trying to not focus on the scars on my body that I would never lose.

In some ways I was proud of them. I’d survived.

Part of me wanted to hide them.

I was pretty confused about everything in my life quite honestly. The only thing keeping me in the Fae lands was my loyalty. It was no doubt one of my greatest flaws and would probably get me killed eventually.

Because the truth was? I had nothing to lose.

But I had everything to gain by being loyal to the realm that had saved my life.

So if that was my purgatory, I'd serve it happily. I would keep my head down at the Red Masques Academy and try to not overthink the people around me. I would blend in and become unnoticeable. I would stuff down the urge to take charge and bury it because no one wanted to listen to a bastard heir from the fucking Dark Fae kingdom.

I was still the enemy.

Wasn't that ironic? I was loyal and would die for a country that considered me an enemy.

Shaking my head I lit another cigarette while grabbing some clothes for the day. Ah, well. I guess we would see how all of this played out.

Chapter 2

Maize

If someone had told me a year ago that I would be wandering the halls of any castle, let alone the Horde's, I wouldn't have believed it. I examined the luxurious halls and breathed in the magic of the prospering land. I belonged here, far more than I had ever belonged in my father's kingdom. I still didn't belong, but it was something.

It had yet to snow today, but outside the skies were overcast, and the winds were brisk. I had nothing to do but try to get some exercise in, so I'd worn a pair of leather pants and a jacket with boots, my hands twitching for a weapon. I was fantastic with a bloody sword, what else did you do when you were kept inside most of your life besides play with weapons? No? Just me? The only damper on my day was that it would be my last training session here. A damn shame considering they had such a fantastic setup.

As I reached the training courtyard, I was instantly offered dirty looks. The men hated me. They didn't even try to hide it and the frustration was building inside of me, making me want to lash out. To release my full strength of power. To make them break to their knees. Yet, I digressed because I didn't want to put Queen Gray or the others that had become my friends in a bad position.

I walked to where the practice weapons were kept and easily selected a bow and arrow. I craved to carve out my very own but I would need to take the time to find even the correct items for that. Time I didn't have right now.

Right, Maize. You are so busy. It was an odd feeling being freed from captivity, I mean, what the hell did I do now?

"You look glum," a familiar voice chimed as the Horde's princess walked right over to me. I could see that her fathers were watching from nearby as they began to instruct sparring teams. The little girl in front of me, Luna, was not biologically related to any of them, but at nearly twelve you would only be able to tell by her hair and eyes. She mimicked Gray's facial expressions nearly perfectly.

She took a bow and arrow, following me as I moved toward a target range. I spoke, "Not glum, per se, just thoughtful. Thinking about going to

the Red Masques academy."

I think people had found it odd that I'd treated Luna as an adult, but who was I to judge? The girl had confessed a lot within this past year, and I considered her someone I would protect. I'd never had any real siblings and I craved a family structure far more than I would like to admit. Sometimes I wondered what it would have been like to grow up with normal siblings and normal parents.

"I like the Red Masques," she chirped, bringing back the bow, "my aunt is part of it." Yes, her aunt who looked far more like her mother than Gray did. It was the white-silver hair, I was convinced. Vegas, the Queen's sister, was someone I didn't know well but from what I could tell, she seemed to be a good person. It was a bit hard to be around her though, the lightness of what she was, a literal sorceress born of flames, countered the darkness which I'd been formed from. I'm not joking sometimes I felt like I had to squint around her.

As I said, despite being Mario's bastard, there was someone inside of me that came from neither of my parents. My mother was a chambermaid who he had impregnated and then killed moments after my birth. Whatever, it was…it was what made me poisonous. It was what made me be able to dissolve right into the air and reform. It was what made me the predator I was. It was why I had to feed off others for life and vitality. I shook my head trying to not dwell on all of the things that protected me while pushing away others.

My entire life, I had been good at archery and as I drew back the bow, a large black butterfly caught my attention. I inhaled and let the arrow go. It hit center as I looked back at the board. Good to know I was still maintaining that skill set. Black butterflies followed me everywhere, their haunting wings like a death march and while it wasn't terrible while in prison, it was now constant.

I had no idea what it meant. I did know it was a god damn omen of death. But hell, if I hadn't died before, I sure as fuck wasn't going to die now.

I sent five more arrows easily flying towards the center of the board. One after another. A smooth rhythmic pattern as Luna continued to hit center on her own, but at a slightly slower pace. The girl was going to be lethal the older she got.

I couldn’t tell you how long I stood out there for, but eventually, the area cleared and it was just myself. Luna having headed out. I knew I’d see her again, I was only going to be across the city, but it was still difficult. My entire life people had kept a distance from me. Gray and her daughter were the first to treat me normally and now I was being thrust into some world I didn’t know.

“You know,” a familiar voice chimed out, “it stops counting as center when the arrow hits the others and falls to the ground.”

I put down the bow and turned to Laurena with a soft smile.

The Horde was divided into four communities. There was the mage community, demonic community, and the naturalistic and mythical shifter communities. All four surrounded the castle within their own districts. Outside of that laid the Red Masques academy and larger houses and estates owned by the representatives like Laurena.

The woman was a talented ink mage and she had tattooed two large creatures on my skin as protection runes about half a year ago. What she didn’t realize? Those creatures, through some side effects of her magic and mine, had the ability to turn into familiars, crawling off my skin and protecting me whenever I felt defensive. I suppose she wasn’t used to tattooing pureblood fae, there were none in the Horde. Instead, it was a land of diversity, something I craved after the Dark Fae.

I looked at the board and smiled at the 50 something arrows. “I suppose you are right.”

“Are you ready?” she asked, her eyes warm and soft in the dusk light. I knew that Gray’s men had family within each of the communities, but I had really only developed a somewhat decent relationship with Laurena.

As mage representative, she was going to be transferring me to the Red Masques academy. At least, that was what I had to assume. I wish it had been Chait and Maddox but I couldn’t expect them to do everything with me. It wasn’t healthy to rely on them. To rely on anyone.

Placing the bow and arrow down, the two of us walked toward the castle, the cold ground crunching under my feet. It was then that I realized, we weren’t even stopping in my room.

“Your things have been transferred,” she stated quietly as if reading my mind. I understood why they were doing this. The SE had been outright hostile toward me and it wasn’t going to help anything to stay around. But

what if I didn’t fit in at the Red Masques either? What if I was meant to be alone?

The large castle was quiet as we exited through the gates, Taylor, one of Gray’s guards waiting for us. I offered him a head nod as he spoke, “Your things have been delivered and placed within the commander's quarters for now.”

I nearly snorted at that. Good. More authority. Fun. At least I would be close to Chait and Maddox, that was a blessing if I had ever heard of one.

“Thank you,” I nodded as Laurena offered me a hug. I turned to say goodbye to Taylor and the demon held out a large dark box.

I raised a brow, “What is this?”

He grinned, “From Gray, she said for you to open it on your way there.”

I looked up at where the window to her tower was and nodded. Without another word I went into the carriage and sat down, the dark vehicle taking off immediately. I lifted my hand and whispered in the essentially dead Dark Fae language, summoning to create a ball of silver light that floated above me and illuminated the dark box that had a silver bow. I untied it with ease and lifted the cover.

Well shit.

Inside the dark box lay a handcrafted archery set. Along the upper and lower limb of the bow, carved butterflies in mid flutter met at the grip. The string made from pixie silk. The quiver, a masterpiece in leatherwork, had delicate butterflies etched into the thick material. A dozen arrows rested inside the quiver. I pulled one out to see the fletching in the signature colors of my magic: purples, pinks, and blues. The shaft and nock were obsidian while the arrow point was pure silver.

I picked up the note she wrote in her familiar delicate script.

You always have a place here - Gray

Warmness filled me as I tried to let that take over. I could do this. As the Red Masque Academy, a massive gothic stone building, appeared ahead of me, I breathed in.

Fuck. I hope I can do this.

Chapter 3

Cannon

Contain not train.

I was semi-use to a notice or two appearing on my desk in the morning. I'd barely sat up before the sound of crinkling paper had me frowning and looking up. I always kept extra paper and pens there, because instead of delivering a note…like a normal fucking person, Commander Edwin did this shit. The piece of parchment lifted along with a pen as the scratching of it had me walking across the room. I leaned on my chair as I watched the words appear.

Contain not train.

Assignment: Maize (Unknown Surname) - room 8

That was it. I felt annoyance surge through me and rushed to get ready. I had known Mario's bastard child Maize would be living here, but I'd never met the woman. Frankly, I'd forgotten she was showing up and as far as I was concerned none of the others had met her either. Nothing but a whisper of her name. Edwin and Byron, the lead commanders of the Red Masques, were extremely tight-lipped about it. I had assumed I would treat her like any other recruit but now I was supposed to just, what? Contain her? Was she a prisoner? This made no sense.

Well, it hadn't at the time.

Standing at her door, though? Well, now I understood what they meant.

I couldn't believe this woman had been in the same realm as me this long, without my knowledge. *Maize*. That was her name and she'd been placed in the eighth room of the commander's wing of the dorms, ordered by Queen Gray. No direction on how to move forward with this, after being moved in late last night.

"You're Maize?" I asked, tilting my head. The light of the gothic dark windows muted on her face, as I leaned against the walls of the high arched ceiling. Each of the commanders' rooms connected in the center in a circular living room, so it would have been far too easy to reach her room through there. This seemed more formal though. More official.

Which I needed. Desperately.

Mostly because I couldn’t seem to form a coherent thought around her and I was positive I looked like a complete fool. Shit, just wait until Valerio met her, this was going to be a nightmare. My wolf, a truly vicious and savage creature that resided in me, was rolling around on his back, shifting his head and rear in the opposite direction, as if begging for attention. It was fucking ridiculous. I had to clear my throat to avoid the pathetic whine of need he kept threatening to let out. I was probably going to end up breaking the stone underneath my shoulder of the wall I leaned on.

“That is presumably what your notice said,” she stated, her eyes large and silvery, blank of emotion. The woman radiated intensity and power that had me wanting to bear my fucking neck to her. This was out of hand.

We had all put together that the new Dark Fae King, Bandit, was her half brother and the two seemed more alike than I would have assumed. Cold, somewhat scary if we were honest, *not that it mattered to my dick which was ridiculous hard in her presence*, and haunted. Maize made me feel off balance and stupid as fuck.

“Do you mind if I come in? I was sent fairly limiting information, and if you’re going to be here, I need to know more,” I started with a voice that sounded rough to me. At least I wasn’t grunting or drooling.

Then she went and licked her bottom lip subconsciously, before turning back into her suite. I nearly let out a groan at how ridiculously hard I was now.

I followed after her and closed the door, watching her natural grace and elegance that spoke to her pure fae nature. The woman folded herself into a large velvet chair near the fireplace. I took the one across from her before handing her the notice.

Her silver, reflective, nearly cat-like eyes, traveled across the short notice as those thick black lashes fluttered. Realistically, I knew her eyes were no doubt blue. But they were such a pale blue that they reminded me of a frozen icy landscape. No, a mirror was probably a better description. Maybe I needed to stare into them longer…

The woman was like a carved statue, her dark hair brushing her mid back. Every feature was aesthetically perfect. It was overwhelming.

“Okay,” she responded, handing it back, her face blank.

“Okay?” I offered an amused smile.

She shrugged one shoulder and gathered her dark shirt sleeves over her palms. Her frame was small, lean, but she stood at 5’8 possibly taller. She

was the epitome of what a fae was supposed to look like. I could only imagine what she thought about our country of misfit and abandoned hybrids. Why did I care? I'd never cared about something like that.

I nearly groaned at that. My entire life I had been able to take care of my little brother and stay far the hell away from women. Women like my own mother who ditched us shortly after Jude's birth.

I had found it ridiculously stupid the way my own commanders, Byron and Edwin, practically knelt before Vegas. I didn't have a problem with Vegas but they were fucking mental over the Queen's sister. Don't even get me started on the Queen's guard. All of them...mental.

I hadn't understood it, but now I think I had an inkling of understanding when it came to this insanity. I mean. Fuck. I couldn't think straight around this woman and it became ridiculously clear that for her safety, and my own sanity we shouldn't be alone with one another.

"Why do they want you contained?" I asked, leaning my forearms on my knees. I refused to admit it was to get closer to her.

"They didn't tell you?" She narrowed her eyes cautiously, to gauge if I was lying, no doubt.

I could smell the cool mountain air on her skin like she'd been out hiking and a very faint scent of lavender. It was distracting enough that I didn't respond for a moment, unable to think past my wolf's reaction to her. My wolf who was snarling in my ear like a bloody bastard. I winced slightly at how my teeth hurt, not willing to admit that I wanted to sink my teeth into her soft, stunning, almost iridescent skin.

Shaking myself, the fantasies disappearing… for now. "Tell me what?"

"I am here because I am too dangerous and too skilled to be part of normal society," she stated, looking half-amused, "the SE guard won't and can't handle the bastard daughter of King Mario and I won't return to the Dark Fae lands where the Obsidian Butterflies are. I have nowhere to go. So, I am here. Now, all we need is to plaster a warning label to my forehead."

I snorted at her sarcasm. A warning label would help but not because of her past. Although, even I had to admit the OB, Obsidian Butterflies, were an impressive group which spoke of her training, no doubt. Similar to the Red Masques, they were a private militia that had been formed in secret during King Mario's rule and had helped in finally taking over and killing the bastard.

“What type of magic do you exhibit?” I asked leaning back trying to cut off this connection I was feeling.

Her eyes darkened to a deep almost ocean-like blue as an odd look washed over her features. “I’m pure fae.” I was so caught up in the change of her eye color and how much emotion seemed to be brimming right under the surface of their watery depths, that I didn’t notice her lack of an answer right away. I had a feeling that Maize was hiding a lot.

“That wasn’t what I asked,” I frowned at her hesitancy. I already knew what species she was.

Maize pulled her feet onto the seat and crossed her legs at the ankle. She sighed, resting her chin on her knees, her hands clasped around her shins. I was momentarily distracted by her long elegant fingers. They were oddly beautiful.

What the hell was going on with me today? I wasn’t lying though, Maize wasn’t cute and she wasn’t hot. I mean she was, but those wouldn’t be the words I would use to describe her. The woman was like a piece of art, perfect and completely untouchable.

Instead of answering me, a soft rolling mist of power wrapped around her, almost protectively. I flipped my hands over as I smelled her slight, nearly hidden, panic taint the air. My wolf went completely silent, terrified of scaring her off. *You and me both, buddy.*

I spoke in a calm tone, “Maize, I’m just trying to help. I can’t protect you if I don’t know what you are capable of.”

She didn’t have to admit to being uncomfortable and she was damn good at hiding it, but I could see it. Hear her pulse. Smell the panic. She took a sharp inhale at my words as something flashed across her gaze.

Yes, I had changed ‘contained’ to ‘protect’ because the commander could just fucking deal with it.

“Please,” I asked quietly.

A moment of silence, her breath stilled. Her eyes bled back to silver as she nodded and lifted her oversized shirt above her head, exposing a tiny waist and dark half top, highlighting her cleavage. I felt a growl catch in my throat, but not for the reason you would expect. Although I did want to spend fucking hours exploring her hot little body. If I could get over the rage of what I was seeing.

On each of her wrists, now laying on her crossed knees, were black burn scars, a contrast to her smooth perfect skin. Iron cuffs. I didn’t have a

chance to ask her about them before she let her wings expand out, materializing from a tattoo that wrapped around her ribs. There were other dark markings as well, but I couldn't focus on those.

"Shit," I mumbled.

The butterfly-like wings were massive and a deep obsidian color like her straight silky veil of hair. A white diamond-like vein pulsed across them and I found myself leaning forward to touch them. Every glint of light began to reflect shades of pink, purple, and blue. The tips seemed to flutter as if she wasn't completely in control of them. A look on her face told me she hadn't meant to let them out but she hid it well.

"Don't," she whispered in a strangled voice.

I frowned, pulling back, "Sorry, I…" I sat back and shook my head. What the hell was wrong with me? It wasn't like I hadn't been attracted to women before. But I'd never felt this strong of a pull. A pull that I had no idea what the fuck to do with.

"It's not that," she murmured, her face nearly sad, "but the wings and my skin… they are poisonous. I'm poisonous."

What?

"Explain," I commanded softly. This was by far the oddest meeting I'd had recently.

Her wings fluttered before wrapping around her slightly, "If I am not in complete control of my power, my body will poison anyone that I touch. If I am defensive at all, it's not worth controlling. I have to be extremely cautious. Unfortunately, everything about me tends to entice one to… touch." A small, barely noticeable shudder, ran over her and I knew she didn't mean it as a good thing. She wasn't wrong though, at all. "Sometimes my magic lashes out on its own and in those cases, it doesn't always require touch."

"Is there a way to cure people?" I asked, noting that no healing mage would be able to help a victim of this if I had to assume.

"I can draw it out of them if I do it immediately," she paused, studying me as if wondering to continue, "but the effects of that are dangerous. Addictive. The individual who is subjected to that won't be able to leave my side without feeling immense physical pain. Similar to withdrawal. Although, they will gain immunity to my touch in the future. I feel that connection as well…

“So what I am saying, Cannon, is that if I don’t keep in control and stay away from conflict - I will either kill someone or ruin their life. Hence, why I have been sent somewhere for, what I am sure no one will admit as, ‘solitary confinement.’ They most likely believe that if I am around dangerous people, you are more likely to be able to control what I am. I don’t blame Gray, it had been the plan all along.

“Is that the case? Will you be able to control it?” She was smirking defensively at the end and I could see how much all of this bothered her.

I tried to focus on a way to turn this. “Why don’t you and I work on your control then? Make the best of your time here?”

Problem Solving. The ability I had the most confidence in. Although whether or not I had any abilities besides staring at her like a moron, was currently up for debate.

Her eyes widened to a nearly owl-like size as she was silent for a minute. Her voice was soft and cautious as she asked, “You would help me? Why?” I could feel her magic tighten around me, searching for hesitancy or lies. It felt like a venomous cobra and I did my best to stay the fuck still.

“Of course,” I nodded. Even if it wasn’t my job to work with new recruits I’d help her. I didn’t answer the second part of her question though. I had no answer to it. Actually, I did, but I didn’t think it was one she would be comfortable with yet.

She extended out a hand and without any hesitancy I met it, her lips tilting up. Her skin was smooth and cool, causing an electric shock to jump through our bond. My wolf growled in recognition as I tried to pull away. But my wolf recognized her in that moment and I had an idea of what that meant. That was bad. Real fucking bad. Bad enough that I could feel sweat prickle the back of my neck as I tried to keep it together.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“No problem, Maize.” I said softly, desperately wanting to call her a million other sickening cute nicknames or a label that would cause her to run out of here as fast as hell if she heard it. Still, something about what I said had her ears turning pink. I wanted to drag her towards me just to confirm the woman was fucking blushing because she was so damn hard to read.

The two of us were staring at one another, her interested and me shamefully enthralled. Which was why she literally jumped over her seat

and landed by the massive window of her room when the door slammed open.

I cringed as her wings fully extended out again and her face blanked into that terrifyingly smooth mask. But now I knew, I had seen the underneath and I wanted more. Needed more. This was terrible. I should just get the hell out of here.

“Holy fuck!” A familiar voice had me groaning.

“Philip,” I snarled, “could you do your best to not slam doors open, especially when they are the suite of a woman you don’t know?”

“I knew you were in here.” He rolled his eyes and walked past so that he approached her with ease.

“Hello, sweetheart.” He flashed a smile that had me groaning. “I’m so sorry about the wolfman over there, he can be a bit boring.” *Right, boring.* If I was boring in this absolutely psychotic group, I would gladly take it. Willingly.

Her eyes jumped with amusement as she relaxed slightly, her wings fluttering in a languid wave, “Wolfman?”

“Yep,” he nodded, “he’s a shifter of the kibble and bits variety.”

I rolled my eyes, but when she laughed it was completely worth it. Just like her soft flute-like voice, her laugh was beautiful and even caused Philip to still in surprise at the sound.

“I’ve never met anyone like you all,” she spoke softly with interest, “especially before coming to the Horde. The Dark Fae lands had no one outside of the fae species.”

“Well...” he teased, watching her with what I was positive she could see was in a slightly predatory fashion. He couldn’t help it, none of us could. “Trust me, we are the most boring out of everyone you’ll meet.” He means *rational*, we were the most rational members of our team…sort of.

“Talking about that,” I groaned, putting my head back at the footsteps coming down the main hallway from the lounge room.

“Philip!” A voice growled as my brother in arms chuckled.

“Sweetheart, come stand in front of me. I need your graceful protection.” He offered an innocent look as if he wasn’t the predatory creature I knew him to be. Still, Maize stepped forward and he ducked behind her with ease. She folded her wings in and I breathed out a bit, her eyes warming because I knew she trusted us enough to put away her very real weapon.

Philip hadn’t even known how close he was to death and wasn’t that terrifying? No, instead he placed his head on top of hers and wrapped an arm around her bare stomach. Jealousy surged through me and I tried to calm my wolf down. I wasn’t opposed to sharing but I wanted to touch her…and what the fuck was I talking about? Sharing? The woman was going to think I was a stalker or serial killer if she ever found out what I was thinking.

“Philip!” The voice yelled as the door slammed open, “Where the fuck is he? Bastard took my -- fuck.”

Fuck is right.

“Valerio,” I sighed running a hand over my face, “this is Maize.”

Our rather intense and usually stoic leader stepped forward before tilting his head.

Maize, looking very much like an exotic creature, tracked his movements. I had no idea how she kept her face so void of emotion, but judging by the scars on her wrists…it wasn’t good.

I swallowed back the growl and spark of fury of her possible mistreatment. I had to keep control of the situation. I’d heard a rumor that our new guest had been rescued from Mario’s dungeons, but that had been so long ago and I hadn’t really considered what that meant. How long had she been down there? What had happened to her while she was down there?

“Philip,” Valerio snapped, “go by Cannon.”

Philip sighed and kissed her shoulder gently, causing her to look up in surprise. He winked and I glared at him as he walked back over towards me.

Valerio was perfectly still and I could see Maize getting defensive again. I hated that Philip had been able to put her at ease. Then again…I was glad she didn’t shy away from all touch. Mostly, because I had a feeling I may end up being a bit clingy.

I really should leave. As in, walk out the door and leave the Horde, because none of this was going anywhere good.

“Valerio,” I sighed, “you’re making her defensive and her magic is going to react.” I saw Maize soften at my words as if she was glad someone had said something.

“You have no fear,” he frowned, looking absolutely freaked out, “Caution, but no fear. How is that possible?” See? Didn’t I tell you Valerio was going to be a problem?

“I have fears,” she responded with narrowed eyes, “you just can’t read them. That is on purpose.” The venom practically dripped off her tongue.

His eyebrows shot up as authentic surprise flickered around his expression. An impressive feat. As he stepped closer a growl built in my throat protectively. Without prelude, her misty magic surrounded her and Valerio stopped right in his tracks.

“What are you?” he whispered.

“Fae,” she spoke evenly.

“You can’t touch her, Valerio,” I stated, my commander shot me an incredulous look.

“My skin and wings, if I don’t control them, are poisonous,” she explained with an almost lazy indifferent gaze. I could feel the intensity and energy under her skin though.

“Really?” Philip asked intrigued.

“Don’t worry, I wasn’t defensive around you.” Her eyes warmed on my friend before sliding back to our leader. *Yep,* there was the jealousy again. Fuck my life.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Valerio said and I could hear a bit of hurt. Ah, shit. See, this was what you got when you put a bunch of forgotten boys together that grew into brothers. I could literally see what was going through each of their heads, and if the three of us were having this reaction, it spelled so much trouble for the others.

She met his gaze and nodded after a moment, “I know, well I hope at least. Still, you can’t blame me for being cautious when you just tried to pick apart my brain a minute ago.”

Valerio fucking blushed as his ears heated.

“Sorry,” he grunted under his breath. Was this a joke? Did the man actually apologize?

“No worries.” She let her magic fade and backed up to sit on the windowsill. All of us were silent for a singular moment. I knew it wouldn’t last though and I had a feeling more members of our team would be here soon.

She finally spoke, “So it was great to meet all four of you…”

“Four?” Philip chuckled, “You may need glasses sweetheart, but they would look cute…”

She pinned him with a small narrowed eyed look, amusement flickering on her soft lips, and snapped as the air rippled, a soft chuckle sounding as

Chait materialized from his phantom form. Motherfucker.

"*Mi Cheri*," he lamented dramatically, "how am I supposed to get away with anything now?"

"How long have you been there?" I demanded.

He rose a shoulder and Maize smiled at him with a warmness that was very obvious. I watched as Chait walked around and wrapped his arms around her waist, burying his head against her neck. And see? I thought I was the first to meet her. My wolf growled possessively as I tried to breathe through it. Chait, noticing how tense I was, grinned antagonistically at me.

"Why the hell are we all in here?" Our fifth, sixth, and seventh team members were coming and, as if she knew, Maize twirled easily out of Chait's arms, a ridiculous pout slipping onto his lips as he slid to the floor. The man was a cat. A goddamn house cat. How can someone be comfortable laying on the floor like that?

"Because of Maize," Valerio answered quietly, sounding far too clinical, which let me know he was hiding shit.

I went to go prepare her as Zed stepped into the room. *Too late.*

The Horde, nearly a year after the war, had become far more accepting of everyone and anyone that had wanted to live here permanently. Even my brother who was a blood mage and part demon, specifically an incubus. He'd lived here before, but until people started hating the Dark Fae so avidly, each community had been somewhat biased against the others. Zed had often dealt with others trying to make fun of his heritage…and he had usually snapped their neck or ripped their throat out, resulting in all of us getting in trouble. Asshole.

My heart stopped as his eyes snapped to her and turned black. She must have seen it as well. His sharp movement, in less than a second, to reach her was stopped by her hand. I shook my head as she kept the blood mage away from her massive wings and beautiful face with just a finger. Her control was statue perfection, clearly practiced and despite her words seemed somewhat perfected.

Zed was extremely tense and he tilted his head to study her intently. I had no bloody idea what the hell was going on anymore and that was the honest truth of it.

"May I?" he asked in a voice I'd never heard before. I'd also never heard him ask for anything.

Maize spoke softly in warning, "No funny shit."

Zed nodded eagerly as if the prospect of getting hurt, which he no doubt gathered from her power, was hot. She pulled her wings behind her as he stepped closer, his nose buried against her neck as she turned bright pink. He let out a pathetic and totally understandable groan before stepping back. Then again, I could barely hear it because my wolf was livid that a predator's teeth were that close to her neck. Unless it was ours of course. *Because somehow that was okay...*

"Fucking shit," he muttered before storming out. A small amused smile lit her lips momentarily.

"What the fuck did you do?" Charm, eloquent as ever, demanded.

Her wings expanded out again fully as she narrowed her eyes at him. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

Charm stepped forward and Chait let out a warning sound as he sat up. The defensive bastard spoke again, "I said, what the fuck did you do to him?" What the hell was she doing to any of us, I mean really. It was true though. Zed was acting weird as hell.

Something dark lit in her eyes as she spoke softly, "I did nothing, however, if you would like a sample of what I *could* do -- please step on up." Alright, frankly I found that pretty fucking funny since Charm was considered rather terrifying. She didn't seem phased by that which only upset me more because it meant she had dealt with scarier. I didn't like that.

Charm hesitated and his jaw clenched. "Don't think you're any better than us just because you're blocking our magic."

Temperamental fool. Also, *fascinating* that his powers don't work on her either.

"I don't think anything." She tilted her chin up showing a strength I'd assumed she had, "But with how you're acting I'm starting to believe you may be right." I really had to try to not laugh at that shit.

Charm went to stalk forward but Maddox was there in front of him, his eyes intense and a bit unhinged. Not unusual in the least. What was unusual? The bastard's protective stance in front of her because the man was almost never interested or not lazy.

"Maddox, move," Charm stated, his temper getting ahead of himself.

"No," Maddox stated softly, "how about you leave to cool down?" He flashed a smile, "I really had no intention of going through this with you again. Don't force me to make you leave." What the hell? It was true

though, the two of them may be brothers but they fought. Often. I think he was the only one that could get Maddox pissed and worked up.

“Fuck you,” Charm hissed. He left through the door and Maddox turned towards Maize.

“*Je suis désolé amour, ne vous inquiétez pas pour ce salaud*.”

My eyebrows hiked at the fluent French that spilled from his mouth. Her lips formed a sweet smile as mirth filled her eyes. He stepped closer and pressed a kiss to her cheekbone before he was gone to probably go yell at Charm. We had officially entered a new realm. A few moments of silence followed because Maddox never acted like that. Ever.

“I think we should all leave Maize to get settled, you will join us for dinner,” Valerio said softly in a command looking a bit freaked out. Her wings bristled at his directive, showing just how dominant her magic was, but she nodded.

Everyone began exiting the room in a dazed way as I walked forward.

“Are you alright?” I asked her.

Those eyes lit up into silver orbs as she nodded with an amused smile, “Containment doesn’t seem like it will be boring, at least.”

No. No, it did not.

Chapter 4

Maize

I stood under the hot water, loving that the academy had showers instead of baths, as my long fingers traced the inside of my wrists, frowning at the burn marks. Bastards. A fluttering sensation in my chest had me thinking about a less painful thought, the one from only a few minutes ago. I didn’t want to be thinking about them though. The group of men that had my wings fluttering for a far different reason than what was normal. If I thought it had been overwhelming being around Maddox and Chait, it was nothing like being around all of them at the same time. Nothing.

I pressed my forehead to the shower tile as I ran a warm cloth across my sore eyelids from lack of sleep. At least I hadn’t had nightmares or waking terrors. No, instead I literally hadn’t slept, being freaked out that I was in a new place. In an odd way though, I also felt hyper.

My wings kept wanting to break out and if it wasn’t for the serious control I’d mastered it would be a problem. A problem I didn’t want to consider, a problem that I wouldn’t consider. Besides being defensive, a fae’s wings expanding out meant they were usually in the presence of their mate. I couldn’t be anyone's mate though. I didn’t deserve that and my possible mate or mates didn’t deserve that.

I was finally free and I had no urge to be trapped under a cruel male’s hand again. That was what mating was. I knew that. I’m sure my mother thought the same with Mario. As nice as these men were, I would never be trapped. Contained. The only man I would ever want by my side was one that could keep up with me. Not one that tried to control me.

I had been raised my entire life knowing what I was. How powerful I was. How lethal I was.

A group of women had banded together to protect me because of it. The Obsidian Butterflies slowly created over my entire lifetime. When Mario had realized I was gathering power, nearly eighteen, and ready to fight for his demise, he’d lost his shit. He had locked me up, he’d slaughtered three women who he had known were helping me, and I had warned the others to go into hiding. It wasn’t worth it yet. It wasn’t time yet.

Little did I know, he would start trying to drain my magic. Not that it worked, but instead prolonged how long he kept me trapped. I knew the Obsidian Butterflies weren't happy with me leaving the Dark Fae lands. I couldn't be what they wanted though. I couldn't lead a group in the lands that I hated so much.

Plus, now that there was a true Dark Heir, I was free. I had no responsibility. I felt guilty for lying to the men, despite it being partly true. I was pure fae and poisonous. *I was also* the *Obsidian Butterfly.* I was lethal, and not because of any fucking birthright. No. I had spent my entire life under attack. The Obsidian Butterflies had been named after me because of the black butterflies, like death itself, following me around.

My back twitched as I rolled my shoulders, my wings melding again into their tattoo-like state. One of my familiars, imprinted at the base of my neck, came to life and crawled over my shoulder and down my arm. The black widow peered up at me as I rose my brow at the sassy creature.

Couldn't Laurena have given me a bit more…I don't know, less bitchy familiars?

"How am I supposed to relax with you rambling on about those men? You like them. So why are you so torn up about it?" She jumped onto the shower shelf. I muttered a curse at how nosy she was.

"Like them? I barely know them," I stated evenly, "plus…you know how I feel about that."

Her small dark eyes flashed back and forth across my face. "You have only tried once, maybe this time…"

My skin broke out into shivers as I shook my head. I had tried being intimate once. I thought I had control. How wrong I was! The emotional and physical extremes had my poison flaring. Instantly, he was dead. Do you know what the hell it does to a young girl when her first sexual experience ends up dying underneath her during sex? Let me tell you, it fucks you up.

"Stop it, Sy," a lisped voice spoke as the tattoo wrapped around my thigh came to life and slithered up to rest on my neck. My spider narrowed her beady eyes at my snake.

"Lu," I sighed as he flicked his tongue on my cheek. "She's not wrong, but I'm just not ready. For any of that. Maybe never." It was accurate, though since then I hadn't been able to get past kissing someone and I sure as hell wasn't dating while imprisoned.

Before either familiar could respond, a knock sounded on my bedroom door. What now? I hadn't been lying to Cannon. Containment would be interesting but I wasn't positive it would benefit me. Sy crawled over my shoulder and melded into the back of my neck, hidden except for the ends of her legs that wrapped around my throat slightly. I could hide the tattoos if I wanted but I was proud of my familiars. Lu offered a huff, his black shiny scales rippling as he wrapped himself back around my thigh. I turned off the water and patted myself down before slipping on a plush robe. I would never take these luxuries for granted. Not after those horrible three years.

"Maddox?" I asked curiously, smiling as his startling lime green eyes examined my face.

"Teacup," he offered his seldom-used nickname for me that was actually pretty cute and began searching my room. I watched him, entertained because despite being odd, he was *my* odd friend…friend still felt like an odd word to describe them. Mostly because Chait and Maddox felt like so much more than that. They comforted me. They protected me despite never admitting to it.

I mean I totally kicked ass during training and if anyone gave me shit I fought back. Still, what did we think the chances were that every asshole I complained about ended up in the medical wing a day or two later. To be fair, I didn't complain as much as answer them as to why I had black eyes and bruised ribs…also sometimes a sword or two would catch me. Okay, I got really bruised up during SE Training, but there were also times where I kicked total ass, *just saying*. I blinked my eyes trying to not feel more exhausted than I was.

"Maddox?" I asked again as the man turned to meet my gaze.

I must have looked more confused than normal because in a flash he was in my space, suddenly and overwhelming, as I breathed in his familiar scent of caramel and sea salt. I swallowed, feeling nervous as I always did when the man was in my space. He didn't ask to be there either, neither of them really did. Instead, they were just there and I loved it. I leaned forward slightly as he brushed a hand over my cheekbone and my magic wrapped around his. The misty texture of my magic meeting the almost staticky white noise of his. I wanted to let my walls down to see fully what it would feel like on my tongue, but I had kept the two of them at a distance while trying to deny what I already knew.

It was so damn hard though, with all of this change and more of them added to the equation? I wanted to run, it was my instinct. I wasn't positive the mating bond was going to let me, my wings twitching to unravel. I just had to keep it a secret. From the others. From these two. It had been quite some time now, maybe Chait and Maddox didn't feel it. Plus, if they didn't know, we couldn't really bond.

Still, I had hated when he had left so soon earlier and I was glad he was back. I had thought maybe he had been ashamed to have me meet everyone but when Chait showed up early this morning, like normal, I knew I was overthinking things. I did want to punch him a bit for standing up for me when it came to Charm. I could totally take the guy.

"Sorry," he spoke softly, "I just was looking for--"

"Me," Chait chuckled, appearing in the door. Mirth tilted his lips as he narrowed his eyes at Maddox. "But don't believe him, Maize. He just missed you and wanted to come see you."

I looked up at Maddox who didn't disagree but instead wrapped an arm around me so I was between the two of them comfortably. "Is that true? Did you miss me?" I teased as the large man offered a rare smile.

"Always," he muttered, "besides I wanted to make sure you were okay after…well, all of that shit."

"I knew it was going to be bad but that…" Chait shook his head, "that was insane."

"They don't normally act like that?" I arched a brow. Alright. Good to know. Not ashamed, just worried about their friends embarrassing them essentially.

"No," Maddox scoffed.

Chait sighed, "This is going to be a mess." What was going to be a mess?

"I'm going to get ready real quick--"

"Just take this hallway to the main room and down the large set of stairs," Maddox instructed with a lazy grin, kissing my head before wandering off.

Chait offered me his dangerous, sexy smile. I shook my head smiling despite myself because they were just so damn perfect.

Way too perfect for someone like you.

I began singing a soft french song under my breath as I realized I'd picked that up from Maddox at some point in the last year. Except he had a

far better singing voice than myself. I wondered where he had learned it? I mean, I had learned it from the two of them, but they seemed to speak it fluently. Sometimes I wondered if it was their first language but I knew that wasn't the case.

In fact, I honestly felt like I knew these men way more than I realized or maybe I hadn't been thinking about it as much as I should have. It didn't surprise me that they had come to check up on me.

I closed the door going to the large chest of clothing I had from Gray's castle. I figured I would get dressed because I had no doubt someone would come knocking eventually.

Except it wasn't a knock.

I slid on a pair of deep sapphire-colored undergarments, the material hugging my hips and bottom and my breasts covered by a lace cup. It was stunning and I caught my reflection in the mirror, my hair drying in a slightly wavy tone because I hadn't brushed it yet. My hair and eyes were odd like that, changing on how I felt. My entire body changed far too often for my liking. I was distracted enough that I didn't hear the door open as I slid up a pair of dark leggings and searched for a shirt. I heard a strangled cough but didn't bother turning around knowing exactly who it was.

Valerio.

Now, he was a problem. I had gathered that these men had complex magic that didn't run the norm for even the Horde.

Chait had expressed along with his elven heritage he had the ability to move in and out of the spirit realm, more spirit than man half the time. He was essentially a ghost is what I was saying but still very much alive. A realm traveler of sorts. Not a necromancer fully but a different level of that same tree.

Then there was Maddox that had psychic abilities but not your run of the mill. No these were more along the lines of warping reality and reading minds while moving shit across the room. Not that he ever did that though because the man would rather lay out and read with me all afternoon. The two of them were insane, odd, and very sweet in the most different of ways.

However, Valerio was a different story and a far different problem. Have you ever met someone that calls to you for all the wrong reasons? His intensity and the darkness radiating off him caused my wings to flutter, wanting to expand out not only in defense but attraction. He was bossy and commanding. Part of me wanted to tell him where to stick it and the other

part of me already respected him. He was the one I was worried about most finding out we were mates. He didn't strike me as the type to take that easily. It was good in a way with them being mainly hybrids, except for Cannon, they didn't have the same type of mating bond right off the bat that I had. Maybe even Cannon hadn't noticed it. Still, it was up to me to claim them as my mate and I was not going to fucking do it. *No way. No how. I refused.*

"It's okay, Valerio, you can come in," I told him softly as I pulled out a large oversized gray sweater that matched the socks on my feet. I pulled it over my head but froze when I felt a large cool hand against my back. I couldn't help the tremble of tension that went through me as I strangled my control with a small worried noise emitting from my throat.

"Are these scars?" His commanding voice distracted me completely and I was caught off guard by the midnight scent that wrapped around me, a mix of rain and night magic. It shouldn't have made me relax but everything inside was begging me to melt into him.

"Yes," I finally admitted as he ran a hand down the strips of iron burns that littered my back. Three to be exact. My wings covered most of it but the burns were still there. Still painfully embedded in my skin and subconscious. I could almost feel the panic attack coming on and it was simply because he had put a goddamn hand on my back. It was ridiculous.

"How?" he hissed in a quiet soft voice.

My sweater was up and over as I tugged on boots ignoring him at first. I finally turned and met his gaze, "I would rather not talk about this right now, you understand, right?"

I didn't care if he did.

His fathomless eyes, dark like the universe's cosmos, twinkled with something dangerous as his cut jaw clenched. The leanest out of all the men, he was still 6 feet tall with a body like a runner. Yet, his intensity and void of power made me shiver in anticipation.

His magic was there alright but it was invisible, ready to attack right when you didn't expect it. I had no idea what type of magic he had and promised myself I'd take time to learn that. It felt important to know about this man and not just because of our connection. No, I felt like I was in danger every moment I went without understanding him fully.

He ran a hand through his dark amethyst colored hair as he watched me with curiosity and caution. I offered him a smile and moved around him to

brush out my hair. When I came back the odd intensity was gone and he had left the room. I breathed out in slight relief as my body relaxed. I had no idea how I was going to be close to men like this. Men that were frankly driving me crazy already.

I found my way to a door from which they had all entered. I had yet to really unpack but it was a stunning place with dark soft bedding and a roaring fire to keep the chill of my magic temporarily away. And the nightmares. God, I hope it helped with those. Either that or I was going to have to lock my doors so no one could come in and try to keep my whimpering and crying to a minimum. Yeah. That sounds easy.

“There she is,” Philip flashed me a charming smile as he walked out of his own room. Cannon hadn’t been lying, it seemed all eight suites had their own living spaces and bathrooms. All connected like a spoked wheel to a center room. Technically, none of us would have to leave our quarters to see one another. I found myself wondering who was next to mine on either side.

I didn’t answer Philip right away, looking around the massive main room, filled with dark wood and stone that arched to a high peak. A roaring fireplace and thick rugs under large couches layered the space. Books were spread out across the tables, and it was clear that each man had a place they liked to sit, small items that differentiated the area filled it.

There was also a large circular table that I assumed they held meetings at. It was a fascinating place. From what I’d learned about the Red Masques, the established teams, post academy, got houses off the main building. I had to assume these men were kept here because they were directly in charge of everyone that attended the institution. Honestly, that type of power was a bit attractive.

“Maize?” Philip asked as I zoned back in and offered a small smile.

“Sorry,” I explained, “this is all new and a bit--”

“Overwhelming?” he asked softly and I nodded, following his motion to go towards a large door that I had to assume was the one Maddox and Chait had referred to.

“Where is everyone?” I curiously asked the man whose very essence breathed magic. My world had been filled with such heavy and thick darkness that the colors of these men didn’t fail to entertain me. But weren’t colorful predators usually the most dangerous?

Philip was dressed…well, sort of like a prince if we were being honest. A richly colored blue velvet blazer fit to his muscular 6’2 build and showed

off his healthy golden skin tone. His hair was styled neatly but was a rose color that had to be natural because there was no way dye could achieve that. His thick dark lashes showed off a pair of rich sapphire eyes that I knew I would drown in if I stared at him for too long. See what I mean? They were something else completely. The man was beautiful. Honestly, almost too beautiful and if it wasn't for the darkness in his eyes I would probably feel bad about interacting with him. I didn't want to ruin him in any way. But as it stood, there was a darkness to him and his soft yet commanding voice had me melting completely. I tried to listen to what he was saying but had to play catch up as his rose scent sauntered around me, urging me to submit to him. To drown in him. The man had done nothing to intimidate me yet I wanted to crawl on his lap and let him take me however he wanted. Fucking ridiculous.

"Downstairs," he flashed a charming smile of brilliant teeth, "we eat with the rest of the academy as a show of unity or something."

Oh.

I swallowed nervously as he placed a hand on my lower back, not seeming worried in the slightest that I could kill him. "Don't worry, sweetheart, you will be fine."

"Not worried," I lied with a small forced smile.

I was worried. Real fucking worried.

Chapter 5

Maize

The gothic architecture of the entire building bathed each corner in dark shadows and shifting magic. It would have been creepy if I was worried about my physical safety. As it stood, I knew I would fare well in an actual fight. My only fault? My magic didn't work when it came to swords, boots, or anything else covered. Hand to hand was the only way to poison my victim, however sometimes my magic had lashed out on its own and in those cases…well, I had no idea what I was capable of.

Attractive right? Good thing I was a lethal fighter to make up for my magic's unexpected actions and I could thank the Obsidian Butterflies for that. Those women made sure I was prepared to deal with whatever my father would throw at me…well, except locking me up. Hell. At least I wasn't my brother… The poor bastard deserved the treatment he had received, but in some ways I felt bad for him. I learned from an early age there was no way to appease my father, but Bandit still tried.

So yes, I didn't worry about the darkness, the shadows here were comfortable in some ways. Known. Like being locked up. I know it's a bit contradictory isn't it?

The darkness also made my mates… I mean, *these men*, stand out far more. Philip laughed at whatever expression I made as we neared the door, squeezing my waist tighter because I no doubt looked extremely uncomfortable. It was a fantastic laugh and distracted me enough that I couldn't give him shit for laughing at me, it also distracted me from worrying about our entrance into the great hall. *Bastard*. I heard the room shuffle to attention as everyone snapped their heads towards us.

Maker. Please tell me I wasn't the only woman in this place. Please. At least SE had some female representation, although barely. Plus our Queen was a badass so that was a plus. Everyone stared way longer than polite and as we made our way through the low lit stone room, I felt a chill go up my spine because they weren't friendly stares. Not that they'd ever been friendly really but these felt considerably cold, not heated with anger like the SE. These were far more calculating and dangerous. I kept my eyes at

the long table ahead where all of the commanders were sitting…wonderful. Because I'm sure that wouldn't garner even more attention.

All I wanted to do was blend in. How hard was that to ask for?

"Back to eating," Charm's smoky voice echoed through the space from up front. I did my best to avoid his gaze but I was running out of places to fucking look. I would accuse Charm of being nice or even protective in his directive, but we all knew that was bullshit.

This wasn't my first time hearing about Charm and let me tell you, his reputation precedes him. If I had known he would be one of the men I'd be living with I would have reconsidered. No one had mentioned his rank though, just that he was a bastard. I wanted to goad him but I knew it was dangerous because the man was powerful. Unfortunately.

"Come on," Philip urged happily, as he intertwined our fingers making my heart beat rapidly. I mean part of it was totally because…well, he was hot as hell. The other part? The last thing I needed was to be viewed as a sexual creature in any situation. The military was dangerous when you were viewed that way. I swallowed but didn't pull away as we reached the large wood table up front. My eyes flickered to Valerio, a phantom of his cold large hand on my back from earlier, as he watched me without looking away. Maddox and Chait were to his left and both offered me what I knew to be comforting expressions, I wasn't positive it helped. Then there was fucking Charm on the end of them. Charm who so clearly disliked me, his sunflower colored eyes flashing with something very un-sunny. I tried to fix my attention away from his glare but it wasn't in my nature, so I kept his gaze as we neared.

Except for every ounce of anger I felt towards him, it was countered with that dangerous natural and somewhat toxic attraction that came with being mates. Being someone's mate didn't mean that you instantly loved them, but you were attracted to them and that was one hell of a pull. My throat dried as we neared the beautiful bastard, his tanned golden skin and wavy blonde hair making him look like some type of sun god. My nails bit into my skin on the hand Philip wasn't keeping captive. Why did Charm have to wear a suit? It made him seem so much larger than his 6' something frame. Honestly, the only imperfection I could see was a scar through his eyebrow and you could hardly call that an imperfection.

You know in some ways I felt better that he was one of my mates. Because I had no problem rejecting him. At least that is what I told myself.

Honestly, it didn’t surprise me that I would find all my mates at one time. I think I knew this was going to happen after being around Chait or Maddox. I think they knew it so they kept them at a distance because I clearly hadn’t. I still wasn’t ready. I hoped they didn’t say anything. Maybe they didn’t actually know. Fuck, I could not stop overthinking this shit. It was overwhelming. This was fate’s way of screwing me over. It wasn’t unusual to have multiple mates and I suppose them being a team made it easier… sorta. What am I even saying? I’m not considering this or any of them. Screw this.

I must have been staring because Charm offered me a wicked dimpled smirk. Seriously? He had to be the one to have dimples? Distracted by something Chait said, he turned his head sharply, flashing me golden gauges that covered each ear extensively. The man had a golden light around him and despite not getting close to him, I knew he smelled sweet like sugar. The entire whole of him was appealing and that didn’t surprise me because of how dangerous he was. Unfortunately, I *did* recognize his species and it didn’t surprise me that the demon smelled like sunshine and the sweetest bakery in the realms. What I am saying is that he is goddamn mouthwatering and I already hated him. He had this rude cocky attitude that made me furious.

Like, *I fucking dare you to touch me.* He’d be down for the count in seconds and I wouldn’t save him…probably. My only joy? That he found me attractive as well and hated it. I offered him an arched eyebrow in challenge once he looked back to stare at me as Philip led me around the other side of the table. I was caught off guard when a large arm wrapped around me and spun me slightly so that I was looking down, barely though, at Cannon lounging in the seat closest to Valerio.

The touch was bolder than I expected but I sunk into it slightly. Was it weird that I was letting them touch me so much? Specifically Philip and Cannon…I mean Chait and Maddox didn’t seem weird at all anymore. Sort of. Honestly, I hadn’t had a lot of positive touch in my life so when they touched me it felt warm and I didn’t want to reject it or them. I was so screwed.

I knew it was natural for the mating bond to create these feelings and I would call it a forced affection, but Charm was proof that it wasn’t like that. There was comfortability of course but I just genuinely liked what I knew about these men so far. Realizing someone was your mate was as easy as

breathing and as terrifying as jumping off a cliff. Well, at least I would imagine so if you didn't have wings.

Cannon's large shoulders were hard under my light hold and I examined his burning white-hot eyes that should have looked dangerous. Hell, sort of did look dangerous, but all he was looking at me with was patience, affection, and heat. He tossed me a smile at my obvious staring as my hand twitched to run through his thick, dark hair, a low rumble from his chest breaking me from my chance.

What the hell was I doing?

I went to step back but he stopped me and I flushed slightly at the large grip on my waist. "You're big." I winced realizing how the hell that sounded. He shook with laughter as he distracted me with his honey-smooth voice. A voice that comforted me so damn much this morning. *Protect not contain.* Did he mean that?

"Or you're tiny," he offered with a reckless grin. Despite his sweet side I could feel his animal, primal and savage, pacing underneath his skin. I desperately wanted to draw him out but I tried to be rational. Nothing good came out of teasing savage animals, even if all I knew of these types of shifters were from books.

Talking about that, I really needed to find a library and learn more about the mages, shifters, and demons within the Horde.

"Hm," I grinned, "I don't think size would matter that much while fighting with me--"

"Cute," a voice clipped as I raised my eyes to the final member of the commanding squad who had interrupted us. "Except you two are giving all of our men a show, so please sit down."

He made a fair point if we were being honest. I offered him a curious look and Cannon released me as I sat between the two of them, my face feeling a bit heated after being so close to him. All of my cool and calm control seemed to disappear when I was around some of my mates.

Cannon was relaxed but Zed was tense and vibrating with energy that felt good against my skin. I hated that I felt like I had a bit of control over him but his power wanted to submit. Even now the purple energy rolled over my skin and wrapped itself up, bending under my own. It turned me on and I could literally feel my skin heating, center clenching at the thought of having power over the massive man.

“You would feel better if you relaxed,” I commented softly as I met a pair of burning lilac eyes surrounded by thick dark lashes. Everything about the man was sexy from his cut jaw to the way his dark hair laid slick back to highlight his full lips. I felt as though I was seeing a sneak peek into the real Zed and not just the sadistic smile I’d seen him flash to his brothers originally.

His expensive cologne wrapped around me like his velvet voice, “Listen, angel face, I can’t exactly relax when I want to bury myself into you several different ways, fangs included. What I need to do is stay away from you.” So he was a type of mage that drank blood? Fascinating.

But yeah. That was sort of what I should expect.

I mean I was interrupting their lives. I was a threat. I wasn’t even from the Horde. They had no reason to even want to be around me and I was positive it was mostly because of the job, with the exception of Maddox and Chait. It was easy to just chalk up Cannon and Philip’s comfortability and physical touch to convenience. And that was what it was. I was here so it was easy to fall into it. I swallowed hard, feeling pain lance through me.

“Sounds like a lot of work,” I commented dryly, smoothing out my expression while ignoring the annoying twinge of ridiculous hurt. *Just the mating bond. That was all it fucking was.* This was nothing new, for the record, people wanting to distance themselves from me. It had been like that with the OB as well. Committed, loyal, but distant. I suppose that would be my entire life, wouldn’t it? I didn’t want to make a habit out of killing people, now did I? And trust me, those around me were always at risk of being killed or injured.

I could feel his eyes on me as I looked over the crowd of massively muscled warriors, all of which were poorly attempting to not look at me. I breathed in as I took a sip of the wine placed in front of me. This was going to be a long…well, shit, I had no idea how long I’d be here. Once again I found myself at that damn crossroad. I had nowhere else to go besides my loyalty to a place that hated me. This. This was some bullshit.

“Angel,” Zed demanded as I slid my eyes over to him and offered a blank expression.

His jaw tightened as he looked away. I simply ignored him, not really understanding what his problem was, and began to eat the food that appeared in front of me. The commander’s table was comfortably silent but

I could briefly hear the conversations flooding the room. *Mainly about me*. Shocking. I know.

"Why the hell is she here?"

"Better question, why with the commanders?"

"Keep your goddamn voice down…"

"I heard she can kill with just a touch, could you imagine fucking someone like that? Talk about living on the edge."

"I think it's stupid she is here, pure fae kicked us out of their kingdoms and she walks her ass in here as if she's important. Doesn't seem fucking special to me."

I stopped eating and inhaled with frustration. I could feel my familiars come to life defensively as Lu made an appearance and crawled up across my shoulders. Sy stayed hidden for now. I would have liked to claim that I tried to stop Lu but I didn't.

"What the ever living hell?" Zed cursed as Cannon grunted but didn't move. I let Lu circle around my waist and then arm before coiling on the other side of my plate facing the crowd. The onyx cobra silenced the room and I couldn't blame them, he was enormous and his fangs hung down as if tempting someone to try something. I ran my fingers over his dry warm scales and it soothed me. I continued to drink my wine taking solace in how quiet it was despite the stares I felt on me. I didn't even bother eating. I'd gone so long without food and it made me nervous to ever accept anything because I felt like it came with attachments.

"Maize," Valerio demanded my gaze and I met his frustrated expression before I shrugged. I wasn't going to apologize for them doing their job. Familiars not only aided in an overflow of magic but were also protective when their owner felt defensive. It was odd because I knew some familiars were shifters, like Queen Gray's. Others though were pure animals like mine. I think I preferred that. I wonder what they would be like if they could change into a human form… probably bitchy still.

"She's reacting to what they are saying." Philip stated seriously, "You should be glad the snake isn't killing anyone." Thank you! I wanted to hug the man a bit. Not to feel his muscles of course.

Valerio closed his eyes, grunting, and stood, "I really assumed that a lot of you were old enough to not be so childish, but since that doesn't seem to be the case an introduction would be best."

I really didn't think that was necessary.

“Maize?” Valerio stated and I stood up easily, Lu moving to snake around my waist and rest his head on my shoulder. I lifted my hand for him to nuzzle my skin on instinct despite half of them staring at me like I was crazy. What? Would he poison me? Would Sy? No. I wasn’t worried. They should be though.

“Maize is from the Dark Fae land and currently under Red Masques protection,” his voice sharp, “if I hear another word out of anyone’s mouth, I will personally see to their punishment. Understood?” That dangerous magic blanketed over me as every face in the audience paled. Alright, well that was a bit sexy.

“Now,” Valerio drawled, “go back to fucking eating or else we will have training tonight.”

I was glad to not be part of the academy right now.

My head dipped to thank Valerio as I fought the urge to phase out while sitting down. I tended to do so in the face of emotional or physical abuse that I couldn’t stop. I knew this wasn’t exactly the same but I found myself getting dizzy anyway. Lu’s weight on my shoulder was comforting. I knew if I didn’t hold onto reality I would literally shadow shift through the mist and end up somewhere else in the Horde. It was such a hassle when my magic wouldn’t work with me.

“You need to go rest.” Lu whispered after a few minutes of silently eating, “You’ve been going nonstop.”

“I know,” I looked in the snake’s emerald eyes. “I feel rude excusing myself.”

“Don’t.”

My eyes trailed up and half the commanders were staring at me openly as I flushed. What was everyone’s problem?

“You can speak to the snake?” Charm demanded sharply as Chait shook his head because well, *obviously, Charm, that is the case*.

“And to me fuckers,” Sy announced while crawling over Lu and jumping onto the table. Predictably everyone jumped back as I smiled at her. Like a trapeze artist, she crawled over my outreached hand and swung back and forth before landing on top of my shoulder.

“Maize for the love of the fucking maker--” Zed’s voice disappeared slightly as I sighed softly but sadly, tilting my head back. Tears threatened just a bit but I kept it together offering an exhausted expression. Everyone

was so scared of us three. Always so scared. Although, I wasn't positive if these men were actually scared. I didn't really care.

"Listen," I sighed feeling tired and addressing the commanders quietly, "if you don't mind I am going to go to bed."

"Maize," Philip demanded quietly.

Instead of listening, I took my two familiars, easily blending back into my skin and able to go through clothing, and walked down the steps towards the main doors. Every single eye focused on me as I tried to keep myself calm. It had been the same with SE, did I expect anything else? I was pretty to look at and dangerous. That was it though. When footsteps sounded behind me, I prepared for it to be one of the commanders. Except I paused and turned only to find someone different with far less power and a sweet smile. Oh.

"Hi," he stated, his ears pink as he offered me a goofy grin, "I just wanted to welcome you here. I know what you probably heard and it doesn't reflect well on the majority of us. I am so sorry about that."

I couldn't help but smile at the act of kindness, "Thank you. That's sweet but it doesn't surprise me."

"Still, as a unit lead I wouldn't want you thinking this was how the academy always acted," he frowned, "that is only one-fourth of the recruits here."

Shit, that's a lot of men.

"Well, thanks for letting me know." I offered a hand to gauge just how nervous he was around me, "What's your name?"

"Alexander," he flashed me a single dimple while meeting my hand easily. He was cute. His body was lean and he seemed younger like myself. A silky strand of dark brown hair fell on his forehead to hide his warm chocolate eyes.

"Maize," I dropped my hand after, not wanting to risk hurting him.

"If you are free later, I would love to--"

"Get back to eating," a smoky voice rang out. Charm. I was going to kill this motherfucker. He probably got a kick out of bothering me.

Alexander's eyes flashed with annoyance as he winked at me but it didn't seem tainted with any sexuality, just honest friendliness, "Just being friendly."

Charm's jaw ticked as he looked down at the kid. "Be friendly elsewhere."

“Yes, sir.” He saluted him and walked off. I held back an authentic laugh. Silence permeated the hall as amusement fled.

“You didn’t need to do that,” I stated, my voice exhausted as I met Charm’s intense gaze.

Charm’s yellow eyes darkened to gold, as he spoke, “I don’t want you endangering our men.”

Ah. I bit the inside of my cheek as the pain sliced through me. That was a harsh truth if I’d ever heard them. I nodded and met his gaze, a slight wince taking over from whatever he saw there. It was gone as soon as it appeared left with nothing.

“Well,” I stated softly, “I am certain that they would appreciate your concern. Night, Charm.”

I wish I could say I walked upstairs like I wasn’t bothered by his asshole words. Instead, my wings unraveled over my sweater, clothes never being a true issue because let’s face it, the shit could mold to my skin, and I lifted off the ground. With an easy glide, I went straight up through the stairwell all the way to the sixth floor, my feet landing with certainty. Then I let a single tear fall.

A single tear was all I got when I wasn’t having a night terror.

This wasn’t new, no matter how friendly they were. I was alone and Charm would ensure that never changed here. I didn’t disagree with him but shit did it hurt. I wouldn’t admit that it hurt in large part because he was my mate, but that is exactly why. My lips pressed together as I walked into my room and shut the door, locking it. It wouldn’t stop them, specifically Chait, but it would make me feel as though I could be alone.

I changed into a soft oversized t-shirt and kicked off my boots before crawling into the massive bed. The stone floors were covered in thick carpets and the windows were high with dark framing. I could see the setting sun outside and once again I took a moment to appreciate that I slept in my own room and my own bed without fear of being beaten. The candles made the room dark and soft as the sheets wrapped around me in a safe cocoon.

I prayed that the nightmares would stay away tonight. I needed that.

Chapter 6

Philip

I was close to killing Charm.

“You can only be a bastard for so long, Charm,” I goaded, interrupting his staring as he stood at the bottom of the stairs watching her soar up six stories. The minute she had turned away he had deflated and a grimace had taken over letting me know he was bullshitting about what he said to her. Which didn’t surprise me. He could be such an asshole when it came to any type of change.

“I meant what I said,” he growled.

“Right,” I rolled my eyes, “or you were jealous she was talking to Alexander.”

His eyes flashed black. “What the hell do you know? You were hanging all over her today like a pup.”

“Because I like her,” I let my lip curve at the surprise in his gaze, “which means that I’m going to need you to go apologize to her about what you said.”

He scoffed as I offered him a look that would intimidate most men. Charm paled slightly and spoke, “I’m not doing it, and she is dangerous. I believe that.”

“No doubt, she is naturally dangerous,” I walked forward looking up where she disappeared, “but her intention is not to harm. I would go as far as to accuse her of being naïve of malicious thoughts that didn’t include kicking your sorry ass. So if you want her away from the other men here, outside of our team, you are going to have to do better than insult our sweet girl with concepts she’d never consider.”

“Our sweet girl?!” he growled, “You just fucking met her.”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I began walking up the stairs, “I feel a tug towards her like I’ve never experienced.” I flashed a smile, “I, *and* you would be a dumbass to not follow our instincts.”

Without another word to the oversensitive and brooding bastard and one of my best friends, I walked towards our wing of the Academy. I knew exactly why he was being such an asshole and it 100% had to do with the

extreme reaction his demonic nature had towards her presence. So he got defensive.

That wasn't surprising and very characteristic for Charm in fact.

I had no qualms about my reaction. Now, I wasn't saying I knew what the hell this was but I felt very comfortable with the idea of exploring it. And exploring her. A lot. Every mouthwatering inch of her skin. I found myself wanting to know every line and curve.

My mouth twisted knowing my obsessive nature was getting the best of me. *Oh well.*

My hand lifted to her door and I stopped cold. I could feel her power wrapping around me seductively but far more relaxed than before and I realized she was sleeping. She had probably been exhausted. It was hard to fight the urge to delve into her dreams.

As an alchemy mage and ink mage, my powers were unique. As in I shouldn't exist. Matter manipulation and creating something out of nothing was my restriction. The sticking point? I could only weave within dreams. It was a terrifying power that didn't do any damn good when I was in battle but helped in the long term. Many times I'd walked around inside someone's head and messed shit up in order to convince them not to do something. Or to scare them so badly they never left their room. Right now? I wanted to see what crept across her subconscious as she left the mortal plane.

Did I dare? Of course, I fucking did. I placed my hands and forehead against the door and focused pushing past her smoky barriers. Icy winds wrapped around me and I shivered trying to sink into her very being. My jaw clenched as I took in the scene in front of me.

Maize was slumped against the wall of a stone cell, the sound of laughter echoing from upstairs as her breathing grew labored. Around her wrists were iron shackles and the walls behind her, where she was chained, had iron installed against it. Burning her back. I felt rage boil under my skin and I found myself trying to control my reaction, knowing being upset about the past didn't do any damn good. I could see the pain in her body though and when she looked up, her eyes met mine. Clear and reflective like moonlight but focused on me, letting me know she knew I was in her dream. Not that I'd even attempted to hide it, truth be told.

"Philip," She whispered, "didn't anyone ever tell you dreams are private?"

It was a dry, sad tone as if she wasn't surprised in the least that I was here in her dream, invading her privacy. I wish I could tell you I felt guilty but the rage was still riding me hard so I walked forward and crouched down, resisting the urge to capture her in my arms. It was freezing and her skin looked nearly blue in the small scrap of fabric she was wearing.

"Where are we, Maize?" I asked quietly, feeling as if my throat was lodged with rocks.

"King Mario's dungeon," she stated in a resigned tone. Before I could respond the doors behind me flew open and I snapped my head around, watching a mean motherfucker locking sights on her, straight through me. I was momentarily distracted by how she was able to resist and see through our magic, but not distracted enough to not stop the violence that this asshole so clearly wanted to inflict on her.

"You should go," she whispered, her voice floating across my skin as she curled further into the wall. The bastard lunged forward, smelling strongly like alcohol, and wore his malicious intent all over his goddamn face. I snapped, letting my power wrap around his feet like inky mist as he dropped through the floor disappearing right as her cuffs broke open. Her mouth opened slightly as she stared at me with a confused expression. I grabbed her bloody burned wrists in my hands and tried to not look down at her pretty mouth too much. Not right now at least.

"You know this is a dream, right? It can't hurt more than it did when it happened." She spoke, her voice hoarse.

A wave of fury washed over me as my shadow's inky magic seeped out to wrap around her protectively. I could feel my control slipping the angrier I became. She swallowed, but let them tighten around her, not breaking our intense eye contact.

"It shouldn't have happened and won't happen anymore," I promised softly.

Her jaw clenched as she shook her head, "What the hell are you going to do, Philip? Spend every night in my dreams?"

"Yes." It was true. I would. The longer my magic wrapped around her, the more I could begin to peer into that delicate skull of hers. I could see the panic rising, but I couldn't bring myself to pull back or give her space.

"I need to wake up," she groaned, her eyes closing. "This isn't real--"

Before I could say anything, I was yanked back out of her dream as she watched in shock. My vision went black, and I grunted, looking at Valerio,

his jaw tight and eyes dark. I tugged away from him and pressed my hand to her door, not hearing anything on the other side. Scratch that, I heard a small soft sound, and my entire chest pulsed with pain. I didn't even realize Valerio was talking until he shook my shoulder.

"Philip, what the fuck are you doing?" he demanded.

I turned from the door and fixed him with a look, "Helping her out of a goddamn nightmare, that *you* pulled me out of."

Valerio's jaw clenched, "Her dreams are none of your business--"

"Shut it," I snarled and knocked on the door. I could tell he was surprised by how worked up I was, but to be fair, I had felt like we'd been closer to her agreement that would allow me to surf through her dreams each night. Provide her comfort. Suddenly, the concept seemed immensely important to me.

"Maize, sweetheart, please let me in," I called as silence greeted me. I knew she wasn't sleeping anymore and my magic was anxious, not being able to be part of whatever was happening to her. I grunted putting my head against the door before turning to Valerio as he offered a narrowed eyes glare.

"I don't understand," he admitted looking wholly confused.

Instead of answering, I walked towards the next open door and pushed into and through Valerio's room. He cursed as I walked into the main room and went to see if her other door was unlocked. I sighed, sinking against the wall slightly after hearing a sharp lock. Message received loud and clear, Maize. I had to admit it hurt, but I didn't bother her; she was upset and probably felt violated. I had fucked up, but I didn't regret stopping her dream.

Without much thought, I slid down the wall and stared at her door. Fine. I would fucking sit here and wait till she fell asleep so she would have to talk to me.

∞∞∞

Or she wouldn't. Or she could stay up all night and I could drive myself crazy. It was crazy, wasn't it? I barely knew this woman, yet here I sat wanting to know more about the haunted look in her eyes. Wanting to know everything that was Maize.

Obsessive nature? Understatement of the fucking century.

“What the hell are you doing?” Chait materialized in the early morning, looking freshly showered for training. I wondered if she would let him in.

“I have been trying to convince Maize to let me in all night, and no, that sounds way worse than it was. I had pulled her out of a nightmare and she won’t let me back in--”

Chait chuckled softly offering me a sympathetic look that actually made me a bit furious. “Philip, Maize not only values privacy but doesn’t let anyone get closer to her than surface level, it took Maddox and me almost six months until we could even hug her--”

“How long have you known her?” I snapped my head up, feeling like I was losing my shit a bit.

Chait offered a goading smile, “Maddox and I have known her for over a year.”

I stared at him, taking in what he was saying and realizing that he and Maddox had done this on fucking purpose. I know as hybrids we didn’t have ‘mates’, but if I was right this was pretty damn close to it. No one felt this strong pull or connection without magic involved. I lunged forward to kick his arrogant ass, but he was gone in a puff of smoke, his laughter following him as I realized he was in her room. Piece of shit. I groaned, standing up and looking at her door once more before stalking through the main room towards my own bedroom.

Fine. She didn’t want to talk to me right now. We had all day. I would prove to her that I was worth letting in. That she could trust me.

Walking into my bedroom, I looked around the place, never taking much stock into it until right now. Now I was looking at it as if Maize was. Although, it was clear that I had no idea what the woman thought since I couldn’t reach her and not just physically.

You met her yesterday.

The better question was why the hell that didn’t matter to me. Honestly, it wasn’t even about her looks. I mean, she was gorgeous, like drop-dead beautiful. It was about the connection that I felt deep within my bones. A constant pulse on my skin. It was as if she had wrapped herself around me, impossibly tight, while branding my soul.

I may have been obsessing over her a bit. *No shit.*

I tossed my velvet suit coat onto my massive bed, looking around the luxurious black room, wondering if she would be comfortable in here. I sure as hell was, but her opinion now mattered immensely to me.

I unbuttoned my shirt and ran a hand over the first tattoo I’d given myself; a massive black rose where my heart was. I’d always had a preoccupation with roses mostly because my mother had been a gardener. That was before my step-father came along and ended up killing her. Beating her to death in front of me. Then the man had the goddamn nerve to be shocked when I had poisoned him. Yeah. That had gotten me shipped off to the Red Masques pretty quick. My homicidal behavior wasn't looked down on here.

I looked over at the massive table I had, littered with herbs and glass jars. I taught a class here for those that had an interest in potions and shit like that-- also drugs. I had quite a few ways to get high for days on end. Something I had very much indulged in when I was younger. I groaned, wondering what Maize would be like high; her body stretched out on my bed as I tasted and licked every part of her.

Shaking my head, I walked towards the shower, not needing sleep. No. I felt fucking invigorated. My first goal of the day? Getting Maize to talk to me.

Chapter 7

Maize

I laid in bed next to Chait, my tears far gone before he arrived, and my breathing slow and even as if I was relaxed. I was far from it. I could hear Philip stand up and leave. It was ridiculous that I felt hurt by that. I had been able to let him in for hours, but I'd been a chicken shit. It was one thing facing it in a dream, but coming face to face with someone that had seen even a sliver of your pain? No. I wasn't confident I could handle that.

Chait, instead of questioning me, had his fingers running through my hair, only slowing as I felt him doze off a bit. I turned my head to look at his stunning perfect face and swallowed the urge to roll over and straddle him. Just to test the waters. I mean, it was possible he wasn't even into me. The idea of being rejected scared the hell out of me.

I slipped from the bed and walked towards my bathroom, glad to have put out clothes for this morning. I didn't want to wake up Chait. I needed to get out of this room, needed to train. I didn't care if I needed to train in the fucking hallway, I just needed something to do with my body. To do something with my mind.

Pulling my hair away from my face and changing into a sports bra and spandex shorts, I realized just how stark my tattoos were against my skin. Gray had introduced me to workout gear, and as I laced up my gym shoes, I was glad that I didn't have to wear leather like in SE training. That was just god damn uncomfortable. I'd worn almost nothing for so long that leather felt uncomfortable and restricting.

I slipped through the room, staring at Chait for a moment longer before walking out into the main hallway. I hated that it was physically painful to leave my bed. His magic and Philip's were like soothing balms on my skin that I was trying to shoo away and failing.

That was why I was going to punish myself with training.

It took only a slight exploration before I pushed into a massive training room. It was a large dark room with mats, rings, and high surfaces that were clearly made for every type of magic-user. I began to run through the course several times without the help of my magic and relying just on my body. After what had to be an hour or more, sweat dripped down my face and

back. Do you know how hard I had to work to sweat? It felt fucking fantastic, my breathing rough as I hung three stories up on a rope trying to cool down a bit. *Now* I could use a nap. The doors opened, and I froze, looking over at whoever was joining me.

“What the hell?” Charm’s voice echoed through the space as I groaned. I let my upper body fall, keeping my leg wrapped so I swung gently, the blood rushing to my head, offering an odd high.

“Morning,” I offered to Valerio, who came to stand underneath me as our eyes met. I ignored Charm and didn’t bother with a greeting because *fuck him.*

“No morning for me?” Charm snarked.

I twirled, releasing my leg and flipped in the air. Landing easily in front of Valerio, the man who had yet to say anything. I heard Charm curse at my flawless landing; I almost smiled at that. Maybe the bastard was scared of heights. It was possible I suppose.

Valerio, instead of saying anything, examined my frame in a clinical way that had my skin prickling. I knew I was asking for people to stare at my scars and tattoos in this little of clothes, so I narrowed my eyes at him, waiting for whatever he could possibly have to say or ask.

“How long?” he finally bit out, Charm having gone silent, so his voice echoed through the room nearly making me jump.

“How long what?” I crossed my arms, finally feeling self-conscious. I had never considered how a man would view my body with all these scars because frankly, I hadn’t been interested. Now I was worried about being unattractive, which was bullshit.

“How long were you trapped there?” he whispered.

“Three years,” I leveled with him, refusing to break his stare. When Charm cleared his throat, I moved my eyes from the intense man to Charm. An odd look was on his face, and I hated that because I would rather see anger at me than sympathy or pity. I hissed as Valerio’s body heat moved closer, and I tensed, my back pulsing with pain. I no longer had iron pressing into my skin, but the phantom burning often bothered me after straining my muscles.

“You’re going to get yourself fucking killed if you keep moving into my space without permission,” I snarled, feeling defensive. His dark, void-like eyes heated and I shivered, my jaw clenching with annoyance at his effect on me.

“Is your control that little?” he asked but seemed to actually be curious.

I chuckled softly, “Nothing to do with my control. I’d been killing anyone that tried to get into my space for three years before I was freed. Habits like that don’t go away.” Which was why I didn’t like sleeping with others.

Unfortunately, it seemed that I’d given him what he wanted because he looked more interested than before, which sucked. I backed away from both of them and moved towards the track that lined that massive room. Before starting a cool down jog, I stretched my legs.

I inhaled a bit in relief as some of the commanders joined the room, breaking up the gawking crowd that was forming. I tried not to meet Philip’s stunning blue gaze, but when I did, my face flushed, causing something to spark across his face. Ah. Fuck. This guy was going to be trouble. Why did he have to be so damn handsome? It was unfair.

I couldn’t help but smirk as Cannon started jogging next to me, our pace starting slow and turning into a competition. I laughed, pushing myself harder. Cannon met me step for step. It became too difficult to run and laugh at the same time, causing me to stumble into Cannon. He easily stopped me from falling by pulling me against his body. I examined his white-hot eyes as he offered me a stunning smile.

“I love that sound.”

“What sound?” I arched an amused brow, “My laugh?”

“The very one,” He admitted as he set me down, and I swayed slightly, loving his touch and the heat of it. It made me have a lot of thoughts, except they were all trumped by the last time I had attempted intimacy. Never mind, now I was cold as ice.

Valerio spoke, “Maize, do you want to train with us? So everyone can go?”

I met his gaze slowly and shrugged. Why the hell not? Philip and Valerio paired up along with Cannon and Zed, the latter offering me a stare I didn’t quite understand. I felt terrible because I could see how tense he was, and my magic was continuously tugging on him, begging him to join us. Submit.

I nearly groaned at the thought of Zed giving in to his urge to bite my neck. That would no doubt be toxic, but I’m not sure that mattered to him. Also, was it just me or did he keep staring at my hair? Like a bit obsessively? Chait and Maddox were off to the side, the first offering me a

soft look that made me feel worse. Of course he wasn't mad. I left bed without a word but he was worried not mad. It made it so hard to push him away.

Then I realized who that left for me to partner with. Fuck my life.

"I would rather not," Charm gritted out, sounding like a child.

Valerio offered him a dry look. "We do a lot of things we don't want to, you need to be challenged and your magic doesn't work on her. It will be good for both of you."

Doubtful.

Instead of arguing, I moved to the center of the matted floor. Wanting to go first and get this over with. Finally, after a staring contest with Valerio, Charm scoffed and walked over. His daffodil eyes were dark, his blonde hair pulled back, making him seem far more intense than yesterday. More like a warrior and less like an arrogant prince, although he was very much that no doubt.

"Let's get this over with."

My sentiments exactly.

I smirked as his sweet-smelling magic, deceptively welcoming, crawled out and without thought, my magic pushed back. Although it was only to prove a point, what it wanted to do was absorb him and feel his magic. All of their life forces fueling me like a dangerous high. I saw him lunge forward and quickly moved out of the way, landing back where he had started, my wings moving at a languid pace. Charm looked annoyed, his magic flickering as if it was reflecting his bad attitude.

He might be powerful but he was impatient as fuck. It was sort of hot but terrible for these types of fights. I, on the other hand, had years of patience.

"No flight, Maize," Valerio commanded, his voice further away than expected. I realized they had stepped back, a protective ward had formed around us. Good to know I wouldn't destroy the school.

"Is that true, Charm?" I asked, goading him slightly, "Can you not handle me flying?"

He snarled, watching me in a predatorial fashion as his magic poked and prodded at mine, trying to find anything in my defenses. I easily avoided it, and when he lunged forward, I avoided that. I would give him this; it wasn't easy. As our physical sparring became more consistent, I found sweat breaking out on the back of my neck. The frustration and tension rolling

over us as neither of us managed to actually land a hit. I hissed as his shoulder hit mine as I barely avoided him, my fingers twitching to pull on his stupid hair.

“This isn’t sparring,” Charm snapped, his eyes darkening, “you are just playing defense and flying around.”

“My wings aren’t out. Therefore I’m not flying.” I said for Valerio’s sake, and then I added, “You’re just slow, Charm.”

Oh, that made him mad.

I couldn’t escape his lethal speed this time, though, and I flew back with his hands on my waist as my back hit the ground with him over me. I growled and hooked my leg over his hip, rolling him as I sprung back up, moving back. Now? Now, I was just fucking annoyed.

“Actually fight, Maize,” he snarled.

“Fuck you,” I narrowed my eyes, “you don’t get a say in how I fight.” Playing defensive was my natural instinct.

“You aren’t in a dungeon anymore, defense isn’t the only thing that matters.” He demanded, “Fucking adapt.”

Alright, screw this guy.

When he charged this time, I threw up my hands. Fine. I would show him fucking offense. Immediately soft silver energy surrounded me, with bursts of pink and blue. Everything was dark and stark in my life, but sometimes this light would make an appearance. Charm froze. His eyes dilated as he watched me, his pulse increasing. At least he was smart enough to realize what danger looked like.

“Defense is exactly how my magic works,” I moved forward as I let my magic out, locking his ankles to the ground as his magic froze, refusing to work with him. “So don’t tell me how the fuck to fight. I could kill you, Charm. It would be that simple. I could touch you and shut down your entire system until you were struggling for your very last breath. And I would let you die--”

“Screw you,” Charm bit out, tension riding his muscular body hard.

“Didn’t you say I was just ‘flying around’? Well, let me warn you, it is a far better option than me killing you. Unless, of course, you want that--”

I grunted as his magic finally blasted out against mine, throwing me back as I hit into the wall, my head snapping back. *Ah. Shit.*

His power locked around me as I felt my energy zap, leaving me completely. I tried to keep my control, but I couldn’t, and I knew this could

only be bad. If my magic rebounded, I don't think it would matter if I touched him. I curled into myself as his shadow shaded me. My eyes fluttered, his demonic magic pulling and tugging on me, reminding me of Mario. Reminding me of the way he used to drain me, my magic hissing under my skin like a trapped feral animal.

Unbearable pain drained through me as my father laughed, my magic offering me a hopeless expression. I could feel him pulling ounce after ounce of my magic. My eyes fluttered shut, tears pouring down my face as silent screams had my mouth open. It was like I was being eaten by fire from the inside out…

"Charm, cut it the fuck out. Now," someone's yelling had me snapping from my memory. I winced, gasping as I fell forward at the release of his magic. My hearing was in and out as I felt spots dot my vision. He was right. This was why I played defense because clearly, I sucked at offense. I could feel tears staining my cheeks from the memory and I trembled, trying to push myself up off the mat. Instantly, my hearing popped and I could hear someone was seriously pissed, or several someones, but I didn't care.

I looked up at Charm and found his eyes wide and void of any sarcasm. I would bet he got some of that fucking shit going through my head. The man's magic was complicated, but I was damn near positive that he had the ability to see what others desired and to turn it on them. Well, I guess he got more than he bargained for because my thoughts were anything but desire. My voice was thick as I finally spoke.

"You *ever* do that again and I won't stop myself from killing you." My whisper had his jaw clenching as I pushed through Zed and Philip, both of them trying to get me to stop. I paid them no mind. Instead I walked out of the facility, my cheeks wet with tears and body trembling with electricity. I let my wings out and made it to my suite in minutes, throwing open the door then slamming it before locking it and letting my familiars out.

"Holy shit," Sy groaned jumping off me and around the room, "that was intense."

I sighed as Lu slithered down and they took some of the energy coursing through me. I slid down onto the floor. The two of them talked and complained quietly as I gripped my hair, feeling like I was on the verge of a panic attack and going back to kill Charm.

I needed space. That's what I needed. Some fucking space.

Maybe I would go out. That sounded good; some air sounded like what I needed.

Around an hour later, silence echoing in the halls around me still, I had showered and dried my hair, pulling it into two tight braids. I fixed my socks and adjusted the comfortable sweater and leggings I wore, looking at the cold weather outside, trying to decide if it would be worth it. I let my hearing expand out, I could hear people coming up the steps. Yeah. I think it was time to get out for a bit. I left my doors locked and opened my massive windows, slipping on my boots before standing on the ledge. I tried to close them as much as possible, letting my wings expand out as I held myself there easily. Right as I dipped down towards the massive garden estate, a knock sounded on my door.

Oh well.

The cool wind felt good on my face, as I soared through the high peaks, I spotted a garden. That would work. I landed and inhaled, smelling roses. I sat on a bench, noticing how much darker the sky was growing. I tilted my head back as drops of rain and a bit of snow dusted my face. Inhaling the crisp scent, I could feel a soothing calm filter through me. Yeah. I had totally needed some space.

Maybe that was the real issue. One I had been avoiding. Maybe the best solution really was to leave. We all knew that would be the best option. The easiest.

I had no idea how long I sat out there, but at some point, a rustle of leaves had me stilling as I narrowed my eyes at a form relaxing in the shadows of a massive pine. The Red Masques academy was obviously filled with people, so it didn't surprise me someone else had come out here. It did surprise me that they were staring at me despite me catching them. This place was so fucking odd. Finding myself missing the castle, Gray, and even Princess Luna despite how crazy she was.

"What do you want?" I finally asked. The form stilled as if they hadn't expected me to notice them. Huh. Maybe they thought they had been hidden?

"You're Maize, right?" the person demanded softly, his eyes flashing angrily. Wonderful. When I didn't answer right away, the man stepped forward, his massive frame making me a bit nervous. I put my hands in my pockets and tried to look as relaxed as possible.

"That would be me," I offered dryly.

“The Dark Fae prisoner?” he asked intently.

“Prisoner implies that I can’t leave,” I swallowed down bile in my throat. See? It was like a sign that I should leave. In some depressing way, my life was far simpler in captivity.

“And can you?” He chuckled with dark amusement.

“Yes.”

“You should,” his expression turned serious, “those commanders aren’t always around. Let me make it very clear. You are not wanted here. In the Horde or at the academy. Your kind should have been removed completely. You’re the lowest type of shit that I wouldn’t even want to get on my shoes.”

I clenched my jaw and looked away. This was nothing new. “Don’t worry, I don’t think I’m staying.”

“Good.” Then the man was gone, leaving me very much alone in the darkening garden. Hell, how long had I been out there? The ends of my damp braid were almost frozen, I stood up, keeping my gaze up so I didn’t let any of the frustrated tears well in my eyes. Damn it, I had never been a crier when it came to physical pain, so of course, this is different. Of course, I’m a fucking baby when it comes to emotional pain.

Thunder rolled, and rain began to fall, convincing me to walk back towards the large building. Black roses lined the path. I wondered why they had chosen those. Don’t get me wrong, they were beautiful but very different. Like myself. Except, not in a good way. I pushed into the warm building and swallowed a feeling sadness bubble up. A small thought penetrated everything around me. One that made me feel self-loathing, a bit pathetic if we were honest. I just didn’t get it.

Why did no one want me around?

Maybe I was as bad as my very dead half brother. Maybe my father had abused my magic and brain so much that all of this was warped. I thought I had broken and been freed from this imprisonment. I hadn’t, though. This loneliness? This isolation? The apparent divide I had from others felt more like a prison than anything I had experienced. It was so painful to be openly hated.

I shook my head, what the hell was I doing here? I mean honestly, I wasn’t positive Gray even wanted me here. Seriously, she had sent me here for a reason. Away from the castle for a reason. Shit. I needed to leave. Did

I really think this would end well? I knew my mates, at least most of them didn't want me. Who gets rejected by their own fucking mates? *Me. I did.*

It would be easy to leave, I just had to cross the borderlands. Where would I go? Maybe the Light Fae. No, they were also biased pieces of shit. At least trying to find a place would be a goal and a purpose. Hell. I could even go to the Dark Fae, I knew the OB would welcome me back…no. I couldn't do that. Anything but that.

Tonight I would tell them I was leaving. I would go to the Earth realm or something. I winced thinking of Chait and Maddox. Maybe I wouldn't say anything. I was terrible with emotions and the call for bloodshed under my skin made me feel anger, if anything.

"Maize?" A velvet voice wrapped around me as I looked up to find Zed on his way towards the dining hall, the noise queuing me into the time of day.

"Hey," I offered him a head nod and went to turn towards the stars. I swayed back as he appeared in front of me, placing rough hands on my cheeks as he hissed, looking over me fully.

"Christ woman, were you outside this entire time?"

I nodded, confused about what his problem was exactly.

"We thought you were in your room," he growled as I blinked at him, not knowing what to say. Instead of waiting for me to respond, he intertwined our fingers and led me back towards the dining hall. I kept my face neutral as we stepped through, not bothering to shy away from Zed's hand-holding, I would be gone soon anyway. It was actually a very nice experience; his icy magic was cozying up next to mine.

I knew the men finally noticed us, including the commanders, because the room went silent, a chair slid out as Valerio stood up. I walked around the table, feeling both of my familiars pulse with energy under my skin in comfort. I shrugged off my jacket and sat in the same position as yesterday, refusing to answer the questioning looks. It was fairly obvious I'd been outside.

"Back to eating," Charm commanded, his voice not nearly as sharp as yesterday.

"Maize," Cannon turned my shoulders slightly, grasping my fingers and grimacing. "Were you outside? How long were you out there?"

"It seems a few hours," I sighed. It was good to know that they couldn't get a read exactly on whether I was in my room or not, or, and this was

more probable, they had just guessed but didn’t actually check. Wasn’t positive how I felt about that.

Liar.

I was thankful for the students in the room because the commanders couldn’t question me. I ate slowly while sipping on wine, distracting myself with studying the intricate carvings on the expensive table in front of me. It was fascinating to think that it was actually someone’s job to do that. I bet it was relaxing. I found myself a bit jealous. Having such a simple, straightforward life.

What did I have to pay to get that type of peace?

Probably a price I couldn’t pay.

Chapter 8

Zed

I probably looked absolutely idiotic staring at her, but I wasn't the only one, and she wasn't going to notice, trapped in her own world. A world that terrified and appealed to me at the same time. I wanted to know where she was because while physically present, the woman was zoned out, not mentally present. If I had to assume, it was a defense mechanism that she hadn't even initiated on purpose. That type of distancing came from trauma. Suddenly I felt another surge of guilt that continued to ride me hard after putting that look on her face yesterday. The one after I told her I needed to stay the hell away from her. Not a lie but pretty much moot since we all knew it wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

My fangs hurt, and I could feel my demon growling underneath the surface, staring at the woman that had captured both our attention since yesterday afternoon. To say demons were possessive was the understatement of the century. At least with shifters, they respected dominance. Demons didn't give a fuck if their mates didn't like something when it came to their safety or health. Which was why I had such a headache because I knew my demon wanted to claim Maize as ours, and he had no goddamn right to be even thinking about that shit. She probably didn't want us. Actually, I was almost positive she didn't. I really wasn't sure if I had an actual mate or if these were ridiculously strong feelings.

"Maize?" I whispered as her normally mirror-like eyes flashed to mine, a deep ocean blue somehow hiding her emotions within the depths.

"Yeah, Zed?" She asked softly.

Her lips forming my name made me feel irrationally possessive, and I had to grip the chair from attacking her. This was not healthy to react to a woman I barely knew. The intensity of it was overwhelming.

"Are you still cold, angel?" I hated the nickname and loved it because the woman was nearly angelic looking.

I watched as she looked down at her hands that had a bit more color to them. She seemed to snap out of it and looked back up at me, "Better now."

Fuck, she was so out of it. It was like she was high. It made me feel protective over her, more than I already did because I didn't feel like she

could handle anything on her own right now. Which was probably not true in the least considering how powerful she was, but it didn't stop the feeling. I was about ten seconds away from picking her little ass up and taking her upstairs.

You know, I'd been called a lot of things. A demon. A bloodsucker. A bastard. A sadistic monster. Most of them all deserved. But these feelings roaring through me were brand new and terrifying. More terrifying than when I'd taken a trip to the Earth realm and ended up pissing off a group of humans. At the time, I'd been cocky. While I'd been stronger than them, they outnumbered me. I guess they assumed I was some monster of old because they'd fucking branded a cross to the center of my chest. Which was the exact reason I covered my body with other religious tattoos from the Earth realm because there was no better way to say fuck you. My chest still pulsates with pain quite often, though. It was one of the most terrifying moments of my life because I'd been barely eighteen at the time. Now though? This was a brand new type of fear.

I tapped my fingers on the table as she snapped her eyes to the movement. I stilled as she ran her soft elegant fingers over my hand, stilling the movement. My eyes tracked the slow pace of her pulse, she drew her eyes back up to mine.

"I'm going to go back to the room," she murmured standing up as I stood as well, not wanting to let her out of my sight just yet. This was beyond a panic attack, I didn't know what to call this. I wasn't even sure how she'd gotten to this moment. What had set her off? Had it been this morning or something else that had happened?

I heard Maddox say something, calling my name, probably offering to go instead. Which was bullshit because he and Chait had clearly had a fair amount more time with Maize, so they could go fuck themselves. I followed her as she walked with a slow graceful gate into the shadowy hallway. I would love to tell you I didn't watch her perfect ass as she walked up the flights of stairs instead of flying, seemingly lost in thought. I couldn't help but appreciate how sexy she was even though it was totally not appropriate considering how odd she was acting.

When she reached her door, I half expected her to lock me out of the room. Instead, she didn't even close the door, kicking off her shoes and crawling into her bed, deflating against the mattress. I stared at her for a moment before closing her main door, locking it, but leaving the other open.

Stepping towards the window, I locked them and looked towards the fireplace that was roaring still, making sure the room hadn't frozen in the time she'd been gone. I went to sit on the chair, wanting just to watch her, but then she did something that surprised me.

When she saw me sitting, she stood up and walked over, pulling the blanket from the bed before literally crawling onto my fucking lap. My eyes widened as she collapsed against my chest, letting out a soft sound, her magic intertwining through mine in a slow lazy fashion. My arms wrapped around her because I knew come morning she would push me away.

I inhaled the scent of her blood, and I could imagine it on my tongue. Goddamn it. I wanted to bite her so badly. Her magic almost felt like my own, pulling on others around her. Except my magic refused to pull from her, worried it would push her away--fucking typical.

When her breathing evened out, my eyes closed. I didn't sleep well at night, my own body at constant war with itself. Being a blood mage and incubus was a fucking miserable existence. I felt like a parasite, and I knew I had terrible attachment issues since…well, I'd never had anyone until my brothers. I think that was why I wanted to push her away because I knew I was a needy bastard, and that wouldn't do anyone any good.

Yet, I found myself drifting off to sleep easily.

I didn't wake up until a small pained sound had me waking up, Maize's brow dipped and tears streaming down her face, a nightmare wrecking through her curved body. My chest clenched as I tried to shift her, causing her to fling up against me. Her eyes snapped open.

I froze, wondering what the hell I was going to say except 'you crawled onto my lap.' But it turned out I didn't need to, a soft sob coming from her throat in a whiplash that was somehow intoxicating to me. I did not understand this woman. I soothed her hair as she stared off into the fireplace after sinking back against me, looking super out of it yet somehow wide awake.

"Angel," I murmured, and she rolled her head against my chest, running a hand over my jaw lightly. I would have loved to say I wasn't getting hard underneath her, but that would be a lie.

"Zed, where are you from originally?"

Her voice was very soft and void of emotions. I inhaled, "The Horde. I was raised in one of the orphanages here."

She nodded and frowned slightly, "Do you consider this your home?"

I watched her expression cautiously, worried about her line of questioning. I tried to answer honestly. “I think wherever my team went, I would consider home.” I was such a sap.

Maize’s gaze met mine as she inhaled as if expecting my answer before going back to the fireplace. I didn’t ask where she considered home because I knew that she wasn’t happy here,…yet. I wanted her to be happy. I nearly groaned because I wanted to make her happy in several fucking ways.

What the hell was going on with me?

When a shadow crossed in the doorway, I noticed Philip there his eyes on her face. I shook my head, and he walked over to her bed, relaxing back into it, clearly not wanting to go anywhere. It was curious because we had always been close, but this…this was different.

Cannon was next, not bothering to say anything. Instead, he sat on the floor, her hands in his hair. He was almost purring and I nearly rolled my eyes, absolutely ridiculous. I think everyone could recognize something was wrong.

I realized what it was though.

Whatever strength and light she had? It was contained right now. It was almost as if Maize wasn’t in her body. Hell. I hated to think about what bred that ability. Chait and Maddox both talked quietly in the window seat area behind us, and it didn’t surprise me when Valerio appeared, looking tense.

I almost grinned at that. The bastard had no idea what to do about any of this, and it was driving him insane. He stood there for a while, watching. I could almost see the wheels turning as he tried to make sense of the situation, of Maize.

I slipped into a meditative state. One where my mind could rest yet I was still completely aware of my surroundings. My magic wrapped around Maize, keeping tabs on every breath she took.

She didn’t sleep, her tired eyes focused on the fire as the others left one by one. When the early dawn began to light up the sky, Maize’s body melted against mine, the light making her close her eyes. My eyebrows went up, realizing why she could suddenly fall asleep.

She was afraid of the dark.

Not in the traditional sense, but it must have reminded her of the dungeon. I lifted her easily and laid her under the covers of her bed. When I felt Charm’s magic at the door, I nearly growled. He’d been quiet since training that morning, which was good because I was livid, and I think

everyone else was as well. I had no right to be so pissed, it had been a fair fight, but seeing Maize hurt in any way killed me. It was a natural impulse never to let that happen. Hadn't she been through enough? On top of that, she wasn't wrong. Her magic defended not played offense, and she couldn't help that.

"She finally fell asleep?" Charm asked softly.

I turned and walked towards the door, closing it as I stepped into the hall with him. His jaw clenched at my obvious distancing move because frankly, I didn't want the ass around her.

"It was a fair fight," he muttered, running a hand through his hair.

I shook my head and spoke, "All of that was un-fucking-needed. All of it, Charm, from the very start."

He groaned, and I left him, walking towards my room. I was praying that I could at least get a few hours of solid sleep. Although, I felt guilty leaving her. What if she had a nightmare or couldn't sleep?

Who would be there to protect her from it? Or to keep her company?

I shook my head, knowing I really needed some sleep because I'd clearly lost my head.

Chapter 9

Maize

I couldn’t properly explain how I felt after a day like yesterday. I knew it was a way of protecting myself emotionally. Some days were just horrible fucking days, and I blamed it on all the recent changes. I allowed myself that because I was strong most days. Lonely and a bit anxious, but I was strong. I was a survivor. Yesterday though? Yesterday, I had fallen so far down the hole that I’d lost track of the distance I was supposed to be keeping. Zed’s hard chest had felt so damn good against my cold frame.

Which was why I wasn’t surprised by who was in my room when I finally sat up, mid-afternoon sun shining onto my sheets. My jaw clenched as Charm met my gaze from where he sat in front of my fireplace. I blinked, trying to gather myself, refusing to break eye contact.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, a little too softly for my taste.

His eyes ran over me as his jaw clicked, “Get ready. We are going to train.”

I chuckled as I stood, running a hand through my hair and leaning against my bed’s large post that surrounded each side. “I am not training with you, Charm.”

“You need to learn how to fight offensively,” he said softly, “The minute you weren’t focused on defensive maneuvers, I rolled your power and had full fucking access to your head, Maize.”

“Then I’ll have someone else help me,” I noted, “I’m not planning to fight anyone anytime soon, so I don’t see how this is an issue.”

Charm’s nostrils flared, “You're not training with anyone else.”

I arched a brow, “No, I think that is exactly what I am going to do.”

“Damn it, Maize,” he snapped, stepping forward.

Growling, I stepped forward, meeting his gaze and refusing to look away, feeling far better being angry than distant. “Charm. Get out of my fucking room.”

Charm’s magic flared out against mine, and I narrowed my eyes upon seeing the frustration under his skin. I also saw something else in the darkness of his gold eyes. Something that looked a lot like fucking concern. I didn’t like that. I deflated not feeling like going through this bullshit

again. If I ended up on the floor reliving bullshit and having a PTSD break down, this would be the worst week since I got out. Instead of saying anything to him, I turned away and walked towards where I kept my clothes.

“Maize.” Charm demanded, clearly not liking that I wasn’t paying attention to him. I hoped it would piss him off. I tugged off my oversized shirt, leaving my lace bra exposed. His throat produced a low noise, making me wish I’d changed into pajamas last night but a shirt, leggings, and socks weren’t terrible to sleep in.

“Why the hell haven’t these healed?” he scowled, his voice running over my skin. I growled as his rough hand grazed my back, and I turned sharply looking up at him.

“Do not fucking touch me. How much clearer do I have to make that to you people?” I demanded, swallowing as my body trembled, unfortunately with a mix of anger and need. His warm sweet scent surrounded me, and I felt my center clench as I began to grow way wetter than should be allowed with Charm. Was it wrong that I also loved that he didn’t back down? I mean, I was pissed but at the same time…a backbone was appreciated.

“Why didn’t it heal? Iron heals over time, even for pure fae,” he asked again, persistent as ever, his eyes running over my face and then my gaze. Oddly not making comments on how flushed I looked.

Inhaling, I looked down and spoke quietly, wondering if this would get him to leave. “My father used to drain my magic. Then he would lock me up. My body was so busy trying to keep up with replenishing that my body suffered. They were far worse, but for whatever reason, they never went away.”

Charm made a soft dark sound, and I put my hands on my hips looking up at him again. I was thrilled to see no pity there, but it didn’t change anything. “Any other questions, Charm?”

“Fucking thousands,” he muttered, and I swallowed, feeling a bit too vulnerable.

“Can you go? I need today to be okay.” I whispered, feeling like a little bitch.

His jaw clenched as he searched my face. “Tomorrow then.”

I nibbled my bottom lip, “Maybe, Charm.” *If I was still here.*

Without another word, he shook his head and left the room, leaving me standing in what I realized was just my bra on top. I tugged on a shirt and

looked outside at the frigid weather. What the hell was I supposed to do with my time here? Maybe training would have been smart…but train for what? I groaned, shaking my head, feeling absolutely aimless. You would think that I would have gotten used to the feeling, but when I was imprisoned, I was scared for my life. When I wasn't, I was thinking about my future or lack thereof. I had tried to escape whenever they moved me or let me shower. It usually resulted in a beating or magic drain, finally, they had started to keep me chained when I used the washroom or stood underneath a drain of cold rainwater for bathing.

So yeah. Aimless was not how I would have described that.

Looking towards the door of the lounge room, I chewed on my lip before I tugged it open and walked aimlessly towards the room. A nervous thrill went through me, wondering if any of the guys would be in there. I sighed in both relief and disappointment to find it empty, so I wandered towards the bookcase, settling on a large history book. I grunted as I heaved it onto my chest, yes, it was *that* large and heavy, before placing it on a large wooden table near a sofa and roaring fire. Curling my feet underneath my legs I peeled open the leather binding.

I knew the basics about the Horde and the recent wars and histories, but I'd always admired the country from afar. While the Dark Fae had talked in scorn about it, I'd found the unique and somewhat rebellious and diverse kingdom quite colorful. I knew why the Light and Dark Fae kingdoms weren't a huge fan of the Horde, and that was because all their illegitimate children were dropped there. Well, unless they were pure fae, then usually someone took them in because they were deemed worthy of keeping. I shook my head, absolutely hating that.

As I began reading the shorter but decadent history of the Horde, I realized where the animosity came from, besides the obvious. It seemed it also stemmed from the history associated with the Horde and their departure. The royal line, including Queen Gray and her brother, had once been part of the Fae realm as a whole that had only been split into Light and Dark Fae Kingdoms. Anything or any other creature not from a 'pure' marriage had been considered a second class citizen. I frowned scanning over the list of the offspring from any union of fae with demon, shifter, or human. While those possible unions hadn't been at the front of my mind growing up, I didn't understand the problem with it. You can't control who you love or are attracted to, right?

I nearly rolled my eyes at myself. *Take your own advice, Maize.*

Continuing to scan through pages, I read about two of the royal line's ancestors that chose to break away initially and rebel against the idea of this bias and racism. My eyebrows rose, looking over the stunning picture of a man and woman, their wings extended and faces fierce but happy. Dark and Light Fae. Not royalty but two pure fae citizens that decided to create their own kingdom.

Of course, it hadn't happened overnight, but when all of the second class citizens left the Light and Dark Fae they lost most of their servants and slaves, breeding animosity. The pioneers of the Horde began crafting a massive kingdom, attempting to put up wards, while fending off attacks from my own previous relatives. I scowled reading about a King Lucias that I knew to be one of my far-reaching relatives on my father's side of course. I shook my head and turned the page.

As the Horde formed, growing to a large size, ancestry, and keeping track of that type of thing began to become less important. Instead they created their own way of ordering their communities, creating communities that surrounded the massive castle that rose up from nothing.

While the gates of the Horde were now open to everyone, half-fae or not, under Gray -- it hadn't been only a year ago. The rule had become that you had to be half-fae, placing yourself in the three separate communities that existed within the horde: demonic, shifter, and mage. Of course, as with most rebellious societies, they fell into their own trap. Soon internal bias grew and I knew personally, hearing Gray and her sister talk about it often, that to this day there was bias against mages that had been created rather than born that way. I inhaled, shaking my head glad that Gray, a true heir, was now ruling with a strong, but fair hand.

Plus, now the Horde has lost their larger enemy - *The Dark Fae*. Well, except me, of course. I swallowed running a hand through my hair and skimmed through each section of the different types of mages, shifters, and even demons -- the information overwhelming but well presented. Damn, whoever put this damn book together was smart as hell.

I was so engrossed in my reading that when someone sat down next to me, I jumped, looking at Maddox in alarm as he flashed me a rogue smile.

"Teacup," He popped the 'p' and rolled his head on the back of the couch staring at me.

“Hey you,” I whispered softly, closing the book and sitting back. “Sleep in?”

His laughter was soft, “I actually came to get you for dinner, I had a few classes to teach today, but most everyone went into town. They had to meet with some SE commanders.”

Oh.

I nodded. “Alright, so they won’t be at dinner?”

He offered me a knowing smile. “Unfortunately, they are back.”

Putting my head down and exhaling, I muttered a curse then spoke honestly, meeting his gaze, “I feel stupid about yesterday. I don’t usually have people around when--”

“You zone out?” he whispered, leaning forward and grasping my waist gently, pulling me up and against him. I melted against his familiar frame, lopping my arms around his neck as my wings twitched against my skin nervously.

“Sometimes the memories are a lot,” I swallowed, trying to express how exactly I felt, “the day after that girl came, the one Vegas and Gray know, I think her name is Nova? Anyway, when she showed up and asked me about Mario using magic drainage powers, I was in bed for nearly--”

“A week,” he offered seriously, and I blushed, realizing that he had noticed. Of course, he had. Also, I sort of loved him finishing my sentences despite wanting to find it annoying.

“I just need to figure out something to do with myself, at least with the SE I was busy training,” I whispered.

“You could teach here at the academy,” he suggested.

I arched my brows. “Teach what?”

“Dark Fae history or just a course on pure fae,” Maddox explained, running a hand along my throat as I shivered, and my toes curled.

His eyes lit up as he tightened his other hand on my waist and pulled me forward and against him further. My voice was shaky as I spoke, “I am not sure it would be very helpful if all my students hate me.”

He frowned, running a thumb against my bottom lip. “Who said they hate you?”

I almost told him about the student that had all but threatened me, but then I whimpered as he leaned forward brushing his lips against mine. My eyes fluttered at the soft touch, and for just a moment, I savored the warm soft feeling of affection.

Then my magic had to freak the fuck out.

Without even thinking about it, I moved forward, searing my lips to his as he groaned, meeting my kiss deeply. My hand gripped his red hair as he invaded my mouth with his tongue and I felt a wave of dizziness go over me. My heart turned into a fucking hummingbird. My back twitched, my wings wanting to come out. I continued to kiss him, losing myself in it, and I didn't realize just how screwed I was until he started to run his hand up my waist underneath my shirt as my nipples tightened. I was so ridiculously wet, and everything felt almost static in my ears. Everything focused on him as I felt his magic invade my head and I lost myself. Just for a second.

A second was long enough that my wings broke out, and fear pulsed through me. I literally flew back and as far away from him as I could make it. I scrambled back, my breathing rough as I looked to Maddox, who was unharmed. Well, he looked hard enough that it was probably harmful. His eyes were hooded, pupils expanded, his breathing rough as he stared at me with an intensity that I wouldn't have expected from the man. I shivered and brought in my wings, not knowing what to say.

I could have killed him. My body trembled. Thoughts of the pale blue face of the first person I fucked underneath me. Cold. Dead. I didn't realize I was walking out of the room until Maddox was calling after me. I was gone though, moving towards my room and pulling on boots and a sweater.

"Teacup," Maddox cautioned.

"I just need some air," I muttered, feeling my anxiety hitting hard. *Not again.* I was not doing this again.

"Maize," he growled.

I ducked underneath him and took the corridor through the main room that would lead me towards the dining hall. Maddox was behind me, but luckily didn't try to talk to me or tug me back. Good thing too, because hell, I had no idea what I would say.

We kissed.

Holy shit. I kissed Maddox. And liked it.

I could have hurt him. Or screwed up our friendship. I may have done the latter.

I turned on him and looked up at his cautious lime green eyes, the man searching my expression. I looked down at his neck, seeing his pulse was elevated, and my eyes ran over the scar that ran side to side like someone had tried to cut off his head. I'd wanted to touch it forever. He hadn't told

me where it had come from, but I could only imagine it had been fucking brutal.

“Maize,” he whispered, cupping my jaw as I inhaled sharply.

“Yeah?”

“You didn’t hurt me, and you didn’t almost hurt me,” he said darkly. “We need to talk about what happened that made you feel that way--”

My eyebrows went up as panic hit hard. “No.”

“No?”

“We won’t talk about that,” I murmured and turned again, breaking away from him.

How the hell would that go? So I’m super into you, but I killed the last guy I fucked, but want to roll the dice and see what happens?

“Fucking shit, Maize.” His voice sounded surprised and upset. I turned back, his eyes widening in realization.

“You did *not* just fucking read my mind,” I snarled defensively.

He put his hands out in a peaceful gesture, “I didn’t do it on purpose, but we are a tad more connected than before… it’s been like that the past few days.”

I felt my jaw tighten as anger hit me, “Stay out of my head, Maddox.” I needed to cut off this connection and fast before he realized the truth about our relationship.

His head tilted as he moved closer, “What you were thinking about, I mean, is that what happened?”

Further away now, not willing to turn back, despite his call and the tears threatening in my eyes. I slipped through the back doors ignoring the dining hall. When the cold air hit my face, I felt a tear trail down my face as memories rolled over me like a dangerous wave.

Horror hit me hard as I stared at the man underneath me. Underneath my naked body. Spit fell from his mouth as his eyes rolled back, his heart stilling. In moments, he had been dead.

I pushed myself further into the path that went towards the large dark forest right ahead of me. I passed the team homes of the Red Masques, making my way through the thick trees as the stone paved path shrunk to a dirt pathway, worn from years of travel.

My nose burned in the cold, but it kept the tears at bay not able to stand the thought of turning back even if it meant warmth. I had no idea how long I walked, but eventually, I broke through the trees.

My eyes widened as I realized I'd followed a path that looped essentially in a U and I came out on the side of town. I stared at the warm lights of houses, bars, and pubs, wishing I could go into one. The one time I had, they wouldn't serve me, so there was no point in even trying. Instead, I sat down against one of the trees and put my hands in the large pockets of the sweater I wore. My hand stilled realizing that there was a lighter and cigarette from last time I had gone out in this same sweater. I pulled it out and lit it, the small glow warming my hand a bit.

My head tilted back as I stared at the night sky that was so much clearer than I had seen through the cell windows where rain and heat made them almost untouchable. My eyes closed as I inhaled, knowing that my time here would have to end soon. I had too many secrets. Too much pain.

So why was I putting it off?

Chapter 10

Maddox

Fucking hell.

I strolled into the dining hall, not bothering to do more than a glance realizing she wasn’t fucking in there. I ignored my brother's odd looks and turned back, my eyes narrowing on the front door of the academy and the hallways towards the back. Shaking my head, I figured I would start with the front, our connection had faded as she ran the hell away from me. Why? I had no clue. She knew I had killed before, I understood the implications of killing someone you are not only intimate with but who was also innocent of any crimes, but it clearly hadn’t been her fault. No one does something purposefully and feels that level of guilt. I would know. I killed very purposefully.

A spark of energy that I only felt for Maize had me searching the front yard of the academy for any sign of her. I growled under my breath and went back inside, strolling towards the other exit praying to the maker I would find her. Maize was flighty as hell, and I didn’t blame her but *shit* it was scary. I shook my head thinking about the times on end that I had sat outside her room in Gray’s castle, at night without her knowing, just to ease my mind that she wasn’t leaving. Wasn’t going anywhere.

I blinked, seeing her frame moving at the start of the forest path, I held back slightly, following at a slower pace. I didn’t want her pushing further away but I also needed to keep eyes on her. Make sure she was okay. I didn’t call her Teacup for no reason. She seemed so god damn delicate to me that I was afraid if I held her too hard she would shatter and I didn’t mean physically, although she was tiny and needed to eat way more than she did -- that was a separate issue for a different time.

Honestly, Chait was far more patient and better at keeping that distance and patience; it was why he spent more time around her. I tried to, but it ended how it did moments ago, with me pushing the line. Hell, it had been like that from the start. I ran a finger over my lips, thinking about her cool sweet taste. My cock hardened at the thought of her curves against my hands--fucking shit. I could still remember the first time I’d seen the woman and the fucking cardiac arrest she nearly had given me.

“That was exhausting,” Chait mumbled as we left a joint meeting with some of the SE commanders. Usually, our entire team would go or most of us, but a lot of them were teaching. Which left us stuck with this bullshit. And it had been bullshit. Thank god it was over.

“They are so fucking stubborn,” I accused quietly as we walked out of the tower and onto a massive long bridge that was open-air, the January chilled temperatures reflective of my mood. I stared down the nearly ten stories to the training yard as we continued our path.

Chait whistled and muttered a curse as I looked up, freezing in my step forward.

Well, I was clearly imagining shit again or hallucinating, not completely surprising, but shit. My eyes tracked against the grey stormy sky, a head of black hair, pulled up into a long ponytail, moving in the wind against a leather-clad body. I watched as the woman walked along a higher part of the roof, on a very thin edge, her thoughts seemingly elsewhere.

What if she fell?

I felt my pulse rise and I realized I was worried about her. I was…and let me repeat this; never worried, ever, about anyone besides my brothers. Even that was seldom.

Chait was frozen and winced as she turned right before hitting the edge that overhung the training yards. I didn’t want to scare her, but I also wanted her to get the hell down. I mean, she could maybe survive the fall. Or she would die.

“What the hell are you doing up there?” I called, my voice gruff. The woman froze and snapped her head towards us as silver blue-ish eyes met mine curiously, and Chait put his head down momentarily looking fairly freaked out and trying to hide it. I understood that pretty fucking well.

“Walking?” She arched a brow.

“You're going to fall, get down,” I demanded as she offered a smile.

Then I got what I asked for, the woman stepped forward and I cursed as she fell. I was to the edge when I came face to face with her floating…wings extended. My jaw clicked as she let out a soft laugh and jumped over the railing of the bridge and sat on it, looking pleased.

“Scared you,” she commented with surety.

Chait chuckled despite the tension he held in his frame and I shot him a look. Asshole. “That wasn’t funny,” I growled.

“Alright, Mr. Not Funny,” she chimed and looked at Chait, “What’s your name?”

“Chait.”

“And you, Mr. Not Funny?”

“Maddox,” I grunted.

She slid off the rail onto the bridge as I finally relaxed. Her eyes sparkled as her wings closed against her ribs. “I’m Maize.”

Now, why the hell did that name make my heart squeeze uncomfortably?

Now, I fucking knew why. Because in the matter of months, I’d wound myself around her goddamn finger. I hadn’t even realized how far I’d fallen for Maize until I realized I would do anything for her. Despite her distance, I knew she cared about Chait and me. I also knew it drove her crazy.

I wasn’t scared of her past, though, or her powers. She was far more scared of herself, her own worst enemy. Besides, I knew precisely what her extended wings meant, and every time I saw them, I got harder knowing she was attracted to me. More than merely attracted to me if I was correct.

So much of my life had been ugly, frankly. The part of the community I had grown up in had been far poorer than the rest of the Horde, and I’d started fighting pretty young. Way too young. That was why I’d learned to control myself so early on because I knew that if I got to work, I wouldn’t be able to fight well. Not well enough to ensure I was winning. My hand came up to my throat, knowing the line emphasized that exact fucking point.

Maize was far too beautiful to be in my life. I know she considered herself wrecked and ruined. But she was far from it. Everything from the scars on her body to the small, almost secretive smile she offered me sometimes was beyond gorgeous. It was why I had kept her a secret for so long. Selfish and possessive of me? Absolutely. I couldn’t help it, though. I also couldn’t help the punch I’d landed right in Charm’s arrogant face when she’d stormed from the training room.

Although, I hadn’t needed to do much after. His punishment was his own guilt, and he was feeling it hard. I understood it more than anyone because the few times Maize and I had fought, had made me feel guilty. Nothing compared to when I said something that unintentionally hit home.

I had the look that hit her face each and every time, ingrained in my nightmares.

Her face would blank, turning utterly neutral, and she would seem to go a million miles away in a single second. Her eyes would turn into deep blue depths, a haunted shadow would pass over her face. Maize didn't have to say anything to let you know she was upset, unlike her other emotions it was very clear when you hit a soft spot. Some would call it a weakness, but I relied on that shit.

The others needed to learn real fast to keep up.

Or not. Or they could fuck off, but it would be without Maize.

The woman didn't want to be saved. She wanted to be loved, respected, and authentically cared about. She wanted someone that wanted to be by her side, not control her. She wanted a partner, not a master, and I couldn't tell you how much I loved that. I just hoped the others would realize it, namely Valerio and Charm. The first was bound to try to reign over her and Charm…well, who the fuck knew with him.

He wasn't wrong about training, though. She did need to learn to play offense.

I wondered how long it would take for them to realize how this should play out. As a team and virtually a family, the goal would be one day to share a mate. It was common and not that odd, but finding someone that fit seven unique personalities? That shit was difficult. The teams that were smaller had it far easier. Well, I had thought it would be difficult, at least. Until I saw Maize interacting with the team and realized it wasn't about finding someone that 'fit' but rather Maize just being Maize. Unbending in her ways and sweet at the center of a nearly unbreakable shell.

I hoped they wouldn't screw this up, and that I or Chait could convince her this would be a good thing before she…well, completely disappeared. Because that was my biggest fear.

As I said, the woman was flighty and still new to freedom, so she didn't know where she wanted to land. Once she did, I had no doubt she would stay put because she liked stability, but until then? Who the hell knew? I knew if she freaked out enough, she would leave, and I needed to work like hell to convince her that this was the place to stay. This could be her home.

Although, her comments about her 'students' hating her worried me. I needed to keep a better eye on the tone of the others here at the academy and not just her. It was a damn near impossible feat, though. She captured my undivided attention.

Pausing a few feet back, I watched as she sunk down against a large tree trunk and lit a cigarette. I narrowed my eyes at it, wanting her to stop doing any shit that could hurt her, even if not as bad as those damn delicate humans.

I had no idea how long I stood there watching her, but eventually, she stood and turned towards me. I didn't even attempt to hide, and I had a feeling she had known I'd been there for a bit. Her eyes were filled with exhaustion as she walked towards me, looking far too defeated for my liking. The minute she was in reach, I pulled her towards me, not giving a shit about her control on her magic. If she poisoned me, I would either die, or she would save me, and then she really couldn't leave. The idea was tempting although I would much rather she chose to stay herself.

"I can't stay here, Maddox," she mumbled into my chest.

"Of course you can," I stated softly with surety.

She pulled back, frowning. "No, I fucking can't. You have no idea…it's too damn complicated, all of this."

"You're complicating it in your head," I accused softly.

"Fuck you, no, I'm not!" She whispered with no heat.

"You can't help who you are attracted to, and you really can't help who your mates are," I put it out there. When her body froze in my hands, I just tightened my grip further.

"You know? Do the others?" She looked terrified. Ah. She was afraid of being trapped…or afraid of hurting someone. Or both.

"It was a guess mostly on my end, so no," I murmured, glad to have confirmed that.

"Mad," she whispered the nickname she coined and only used sometimes.

"I won't tell anyone, but you should," I said softly, "it would explain a lot to them about how they are feeling."

"I don't want people wanting me because of a stupid bond."

"You know it's not like that," I warned.

She shook her head, and I angled it back, looking down at her. "Promise me you won't leave until you've talked to them?"

Her eyes darkened. "Maybe."

It wasn't good enough, but it would have to be for tonight. Honestly, the poison idea wasn't sounding bad. Was I desperate to keep her? Absolutely. Who wouldn't be?

“Let’s get you back inside,” I murmured, and she followed quietly, my hand intertwined with hers. I wasn’t one for optimism, but I knew Maize was underneath a storm cloud of epic proportions. We just needed to break out of it. Anchor down until it is over.

Couldn’t be that hard, right?

Chapter 11

Maize

I didn’t sleep that night, but I didn’t lock my door either.

I suppose it was half curiosity and half not wanting to leave my spot on the armchair. Maddox had left me with a soft brush of the lips before I could stop him, so I figured he probably wouldn’t be back. Why did I sort of hope the others would show? My eyes watched the fire, and eventually, as the night went on, I realized no one had tried to see how I was doing. Mind you, I had gone straight into the shower when I got back after avoiding their questions because I had no idea what to say.

So maybe they were mad at me. Or maybe Valerio had told them to stop with the questions because he had quit asking, too. I shivered, thinking about his dark eyes and the way he seemed to be always watching me. Someway, somehow. It was, overall, a very odd feeling. Wanting to be wanted but also needing distance. Wanting them there but also fearing their presence.

This morning I had gotten ready earlier than the previous days and now sat in the dining hall for lunch, having explored for most of the morning. Of course, I’d gotten dirty looks, but most of the academy students had been focused on classes and going throughout the estate. The concept of teaching ran through my head once again, and I wondered if they wouldn’t hate me if I hadn’t been considered the enemy. If I would be any good at teaching. It was something I’d never considered honestly.

I stared down at the sandwich I was nibbling at, having not sat up front at the large empty table but on a small one to the side. The room was maybe a quarter full and no one was really paying attention to me. Which was, of course, why it shocked me when the chair across from me squeaked back, and I looked up to find a pair of warm brown eyes. I smiled at Alexander, happy to see him again, honestly. Another shadow grabbed my attention. Dropping into the chair next to him was a man who shared Alexander’s features. From his warm chocolate eyes to his full lips, although the latter was pinched in a deep scowl. The only other difference between the two, was that Alexander was more lean to his brother’s more muscular physique. Day and night personalities but exactly the same looking.

“You look down,” Alexander pointed out.

I chuckled softly, “Nothing new, you here for lunch?”

“No, we’d been going out, but he made us stop in here,” his brother gritted out, looking pissed.

Alexander rolled his eyes, “This is my brother, Griffin. Why is he acting like such an ass? No fucking idea. He’s weird like that.”

Griffin’s ears turned pink as he slouched slightly, his eyes flickering towards me before going back to his brother. I fought a smile and realized it was nice as hell to be talking to people I wasn’t attracted to and who weren’t sneering at me.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Maize,” I offered with slight awkwardness.

His eyes moved towards me and sighed, “Nice to meet you, Maize, although I think everyone knows who you are.”

“Dude,” Alexander admonished.

“He’s right, I’m literally also the only woman,” I muttered.

Griffin chuckled, “Yeah, it’s actually a bit ridiculous when you think on it.”

“Right?” I grinned slightly.

Alexander smiled, “So will you come with us since my brother isn’t an irredeemable asshole?”

Griffin growled, “It’s not her, it’s the fucking day. You know that.”

I smiled at his honesty. “You sure you're cool with me going?”

“Yes,” he amended. I pushed my plate away and stood, feeling a bit more positive. One thing I realized pretty quickly was that the days were essentially boring. You could only train so much, and it seemed that the commanders, unsurprisingly, had their days filled with important shit to do. At least this offered me something to do.

“Where are we going?” I asked as we walked out, tightening my jacket around me. We left through a side door that led towards the front, and I found myself breathing in the fresh air with a small smile on my face.

“Pub,” Alexander chirped, “just for the Red Masques, it’s nearby.”

“Probably won’t serve me,” I offered quietly.

Griffin scoffed, “They will trust me.”

I listened quietly as Alexander pestered his brother with questions about his current problem. I felt a surge of jealousy that he had someone who so clearly was interested in his day. Although the fact that they were talking

about a girl that ‘ghosted’ him was funny as shit. Apparently, there was some difficulty with communication.

“Don’t you agree?” Alexander prompted.

I searched Griffin’s face, “So she just stopped wanting to hang out?”

“Haven’t heard from her in two weeks,” he sulked, “I would assume she had moved on, but every time I see her she’s alone.”

“He goes out of his way to see her from a distance,” Alexander rolled his eyes.

“Why don’t you go up to her?” I offered, curiously.

Before either of them could answer, I groaned as magic hit me right in the center of my chest, throwing me back into the snow. My back radiated pain as I inhaled sharply, feeling a hard rock underneath me. My head snapped up as I found the asshole that threatened me in the garden, with four other guys laughing as they passed us. I snarled, standing up but Alexander stilled me, offering a head shake. They didn’t wait around, and instead, the one asshole winked at me, his elemental ice magic leaving me fucking frozen.

“I should kill him,” I growled quietly. It was different before when he had just told me to get the fuck out. But to attack me openly? That was some bullshit.

“Not worth it,” Griffin offered softly, “not even the commanders can touch him. His uncle is one of the advisers to the SE commanders. He’s untouchable. We’ve tried.”

Makes sense why he made threats so easily. I rubbed my chest and looked towards the door of the pub where a bartender stood polishing a drink and offering me a sad understanding look. Maybe Charm was right and I needed some fucking offense.

“I need a drink,” I admitted, my body sagging slightly, and Alexander hummed in agreeance. Minutes later I was seated at a table, and the bartender from before, an older man, slid an ale across the table’s surface.

“First one is free because you didn’t kill that asshole on my property,” he muttered.

I totally actually laughed at that.

Around three hours later and five sheets to the wind, I was having a much better time. I sat between the Smith twins, the three of us drank down a few pitchers of ale, my tolerance actually fairly impressive. Luckily, I knew I could sober up if needed.

If I wanted to…which I didn’t. Not yet. My lips were open in a smile and my cheeks and chest hurt from laughing. About thirty minutes into our drinking, the bar had begun to get more popular, and I could feel eyes on me. Luckily, they weren’t hostile. I was starting to wonder if everyone had a problem with me or just some people. I hoped for the latter.

You should still get the hell out of dodge, Maize. This won’t end well for you. Caring for someone has never ended well for you.

I listened eagerly as the boys complained about being unit commanders and the fucking nightmare that the men I lived with were. I also learned they were both elemental mages, Griffin far more powerful with water and Alexander fire. I even tried to give Griffin advice on his girl problems, but let's face it, I had no room to talk about romance. Time began to lose meaning as the voices in the bar rose, our laughter was for sure one of the loudest. My eyes were tearing up as Alexander told a story about some new recruit that tried to break into his room to get ‘revenge’ at night for hard training…except Alexander had been wide awake having heard his noisy ass two flights down. Our conversation turned back to the head commanders, as I tried to not let the topic sour my mood because I was far too interested in them entirely.

“I honestly think half of us almost fell to the floor when we saw Philip holding hands with you walking into the dining hall,” Griffin chuckled, tossing his ale back, “that man is a fucking monster.”

“Not as bad as Cannon,” Alexander snarled, “I’m convinced the man enjoys breaking people during training.”

Why was that sort of hot to hear about my wolfman? I blushed at that thought and how aggressive I bet he could get in other situations… and I needed to stop myself.

I shook my head, “That isn’t possible, they are both super sweet.” Alright, a bit odd and totally intense, I could just see the crazy in Philip. The man who had been oddly quiet since the other night when I’d zoned out, I didn’t want to consider what he had or hadn’t been able to see in my dreams, probably not alerting me that he was there.

Or he had given up because I wouldn’t let him into my room. Possible.

Both brothers grinned and laughed. “To *you.* Sweet to you. Trust me. Those men are as mental and nightmarish as they come in the Horde. People specifically avoid them during their day to day lives and hate classes

with them. They have a habit of giving everyone a sample of their powers or randomly ‘testing’ them.”

Cold wind blew in, but I was too focused on Alexander’s words. You know because I was totally obsessed with knowing way too much about my mates. *There was that word again.* I blinked trying to clear my vision as a wave of dizziness hit me. Alright, I was drunk as hell.

“They sound like assholes,” I snorted, not even surprised someone like Charm would pull that shit. I sighed feeling familiar magic. *Fantastic timing, Maize. Bloody fantastic.*

“Angel face,” a dangerous voice purred behind me and caused a shiver of awareness to ripple down my spine. “I had no idea you had such a dirty mouth.”

Alright, was it only me or does everyone think of blow jobs when they hear that? No? Just me? Because I sort of wanted to show him how dirty I could be with my mouth…

Alexander and Griffin both paled, causing me to turn my head to look up at Zed’s pretty lavender gaze. I tried to keep my face blanked but instead giggled, taking another sip of my drink because hell did he look worked up or what… “Don’t worry Zed, I wasn’t talking about you…much.” I couldn’t help snickering as his eyes blazed.

He spun my chair, grabbing his own and capturing my knees between his massive legs so I couldn’t leave. Instead of freaking out, I just nibbled my lip and breathed in his expensive smell, wondering if it was weird that I wanted to take a fucking nibble of the man. My magic crawled up his skin silently, his pupils dilated as he seemed to shake himself from something.

“Commander Zed--” Griffin started as Zed snarled at them before looking back at me. You know, it was odd that I didn’t find these men threatening. I wasn’t scared of them. Not like I should be, considering their magic. Maybe it was because for so long my world had been dark and they were just so god damn vibrant and colorful.

I wanted it.

I wanted them.

I was greedy and that was the exact reason I needed to leave tomorrow.

I was out of options. Exhausted from fighting this bond and overwhelmed. It was a coward’s way out but hadn’t I dealt with enough complications and struggles in my life? If love came easily…then so be it.

But this wasn't easy. These men were like me, haunted with demons of their own. I was barely able to handle mine, let alone theirs as well.

They aren't asking you to handle them.

"What's wrong? Why are you upset?" he asked, his voice low and concerned. Upset? Well, I'm not positive that was the right word. Maybe just tired.

Tired of the bullshit.

Tired of not belonging.

Tired of being rejected.

"What?" Zed asked, looking alarmed, and I realized I had drunk whispered under my breath. Shit.

"Maize, if you want--" Griffin offered quietly, but he was cut off as someone gripped the back of both their shirts. My eyes flit up to Maddox, unable to help but provide a massive grin. *Maddox.* I would always remember Maddox. How could I not? He was so flippin' amazing. And hot as hell.

"Maddox," I purred, tilting my head back, "Your lip is bleeding, want me to kiss it and make it better?"

Alexander snorted as Maddox let out a low growl, his tongue darting out to where he absolutely had a split lip. I wondered what had happened.

Instead of answering, Maddox glared down at both guys. "I would fucking suggest both of you get back to the academy before I have Valerio dole out punishments for not only taking our guest off the property without permission but getting her trashed."

Both twins winced, and I grinned. "I see what you mean about being assholes, boys. Go ahead, I'll see you two later."

They were out of the building in a drunk stumble real fast. I squirmed in my seat as Maddox sat down, boxing me in against the table in my chair along with Zed.

"Why the hell did you leave the academy?" Zed demanded.

"Could I not?" I asked, amused, taking another sip.

I snarled as Maddox grabbed my glass and downed it. "Thief!"

His lips twitched in a smile. "Of course you can leave, but why? And why the fuck with them to get drunk?" His eyes darkened and I swear I saw jealousy there…but who knows, maybe I was imagining it. Like I said… *complicated.*

“For the record,” I explained promptly and in a voice that totally showed my tipsiness, “*They* are now my friends.”

“That’s bullshit,” Maddox mumbled, shaking his head.

“It doesn’t really matter anyway,” I continued to ramble and sighed, “I am leaving tomorrow as it is. This entire refugee bullshit isn’t really my vibe, so yeah…”

I quieted as both of them froze, staring at me with expressions I didn’t completely understand. What did I do now? I felt like I was always messing up around them.

“You are leaving?” Zed clarified, his eyes black liquid as his chair creaked under the grip he had on it. His voice was deadly soft, and I felt like I was saying something he didn’t like…oh! About me leaving. Aw. I bet he thought we were going to have a fan-fucking-tastic friendship. Oh well.

Right, Maize. If only it was that easy.

“You are not leaving,” Maddox demanded, his voice rough.

“Legally?” I tilted my head, “Like I’m being held prisoner? Now I am not against handcuffs, but…” I thought I was funny. Drunk Maize really, really thought she was funny.

“No,” Maddox snarled, “but you can’t leave, Teacup.”

I nibbled my lip. “I hear what you’re saying. But I don’t have a purpose or reason here. Plus, no doubt I am going to end up hurting someone. Either that or kill Charm.”

“Which he would deserve because he’s a fucking bastard!” Maddox snarled.

Zed chuckled darkly, “Don’t make the rest of us suffer, angel.”

A ringing in my ears made me realize a dark device was buzzing in Zed’s pocket. I looked down at his tight jeans and blushed to see that wasn’t the only large thing down there. Shit…

“Is that who I think it is?” Maddox asked quietly.

“Who?” I tilted my head.

“Valerio.” He looked at the pub door with tension that seemed odd on Zed. “The others are probably just realizing how long you’ve been gone and we may have told them where you are through the bond. I would love to tell you that Valerio won’t blow a gasket about you coming to a pub to get drunk, but--”

The door flew open, and I closed my eyes in embarrassment. You know, I'd sorta been waiting for Valerio to snap on me and tell me to do something or listen to his orders. This would be interesting. I muttered a curse as I put my head down, trying to blank my emotions, but I was torn between laughing or crying. You know, because of the embarrassment, not my amounting frustration and confusion.

At least Zed and Maddox hadn't tried to take me out of here. Valerio? I had a feeling the bastard would do anything he wanted. Mind you, he took his time choosing what that was, but with the energy filling the space I just could tell this shit was going to go bad. I was glad my new friends weren't here to see this bullshit.

"Maize," a sharp voice cut through the crowded bar as the room silenced. *Yeah, yeah, I get it, he was scary*.

Zed laughed at me as I realized I'd mumbled that. Oh well.

"Valerio!" I chimed in a friendly manner, "What's up?"

Oh, man. He was pissed. And stunning. His dark hair was dripping with melted snow -- oh! It was snowing, that's neat. You know, this ale shit made me feel way happier than normal. I was a huge fan.

"Stand up," he stated softly despite his body vibrating with lethal magic, "we are leaving."

I fixed him with an amused look, "I am not. Will not be leaving right now." I was not going to make a pattern of doing what they wanted unless it aligned with my plans. Not that the point I was making mattered because I was leaving...

"And apparently she's decided she is leaving tomorrow," Zed goaded as I scowled. Really? A dark throat hum had me looking up.

"What the hell do you mean *you're leaving?*" Charm demanded. Alright, now the man wasn't completely stupid, so he had to understand, right?

I looked around, letting out a small unintentional laugh realizing the others had arrived. Philip was watching me with an intense look that had my toes curling a bit as Zed played with my hair, not wanting him to stop. I had noticed his little preoccupation with my hair. It was odd and a bit cute. My eyes moved to Cannon whose eyes were filled with concern and hurt. Shit. Chait was the worst though his hooded eyes and relaxed body position did not match the sadness there.

Could we talk about what an ass Charm was instead? You know, to distract from all this fucking emotion.

I sighed, “I mean, I’m leaving. I don’t have a reason to stay. I have no real place here. I can’t even interact with most people normally without risk. Plus, as Charm so kindly brought up the day I got here, you probably don’t want me around your recruits. What if something goes wrong? Or I do lose control? It just makes sense I leave.”

Not because of any other reason. I promise.

“You said that to her?” Cannon demanded, his eyes going from concerned to black as Charm’s eyes darkened in response to my look I offered him.

As if realizing the silent bar, Valero stepped forward, and I prepared myself to be touched. I shivered as the bastard, who smelled way too good -- like midnight rain, yanked me from my seat over his shoulder. I grunted as my stomach hit his muscle. I don’t care what the heck people said, this position was not comfortable. Although, his hand on the back of my thigh? That was sexy.

Fuck. I think I may have broken the man as I listened to him muttering to himself in a different language under his breath. Honestly, if I wasn’t so frustrated, it would be adorable.

The cool air greeted me. I huffed as he placed me down after we were at least twenty feet from the bar. I crossed my arms and stepped away from him, or tried to but the bastard grasped my arm gently but firmly pulling me to him. My eyes narrowed as I looked up at him.

“I could kill you,” I pointed out as his lip twitched, waiting on the others, no doubt.

“You won’t.” He stated confidently in a low tone near my ear. I inhaled sharply as a ripple of awareness went across my skin, his hand ran down my arm to my hip, where he held me more firmly. I tried to not move or show I was turned on, but no doubt I was failing miserably.

I breathed in and looked up at the others.

“Charm, did you really fucking say that to her?” Cannon demanded, livid. Oh, wolf-man was worked up…over my feelings. Well, that’s a bit sweet.

“If you did, that’s by far the most idiotic shit--” Chait was cut off as he rounded Valerio and his hand intertwined with mine and I felt my heart hurt. No. Damn it. He was ruining my conviction.

“It’s not idiotic,” Charm defended sharply, “I don’t think it’s safe to have her around.”

Honestly, he was just confirming what I had already told them.

“She’s a ticking time bomb. How the hell do we know we can even trust her?” Ah! There it was. There was the asshole from the other day. My drunk giddy attitude sobered up as that raw cold truth ran over my skin. I felt my body tense as I realized just how close I was to Valerio and Chait.

“Just because the Dark Fae are gone doesn’t mean we don’t have enemies and we have no idea where her allegiances--”

I was about to prove him correct about my control.

Using my real strength, my brain sobered, and I broke both holds on me and surged forward. Too fast for any of them to see it. Less than a millisecond later, my foot was up against Charm’s throat as I pinned him to the ground with ease. My wings stayed against my back because I was neither defensive, he was right on some aspects, nor turned on. Anything but, unfortunately.

“Guess I don’t need offense training,” I goaded.

“See what I fucking mean? Untrustworthy,” he snarled.

I dropped down and put a hand at his throat and spoke quietly. “You’re not wrong. I *am* dangerous. I *am* a ticking time bomb. None of that is wrong. But do not ever question my loyalty to the place that saved my fucking life.”

Snapping to a few feet away, I began to walk back towards the academy, ready for this day to be done. If anything, this confirmed exactly what I already knew. No matter how much I would miss some of these men or would feel as though I’d missed an opportunity…despite all of this. It would all be a memory soon.

So why did I feel like it was going to take so much more time to forget them?

Chapter 12

Charm

“You’re a bastard,” Cannon bit out before going to jog after her. My fists clenched as Maddox and Chait both offered me disappointed glares. I was practically shaking with anger as I took a deep breath, trying to control my demon under my skin. Shit. He and I both wanted to let loose, and dominate her little ass so she could just listen to what I was saying. Instead, she just brushed me off. Again and again. It was driving me crazy.

Someone needed to push her out of her comfort zone. I would fucking know. Maker knows I’d been through trauma, and this is not the way to handle it. She’s acting like a skittish rabbit when we all know she’s far fucking stronger than that in all ways.

I knew I had been an asshole though, those ending comments unneeded. She hadn’t deserved that, but she just infuriated me.

“That was out of line, Charm -- even for you,” Valerio stated evenly with his eyes on her.

I stopped myself from looking or following. I was constantly drawn to her. Her darkness. Her haunted gaze. Every-fucking-thing about her. I tried to ignore the surge of emotions she brought. I’d always been a prideful bastard, but now I was just trying to get an emotional reaction out of her because it was all she’d give me. I had tried to make amends with training, and you can see how that fucking went. I think I hated her as much as I liked her, and it was an odd as hell feeling. Shit, this sucked.

“You fucked up,” Zed snarled.

“I would highly suggest you figure out your issue, Charm, or stay away from her.” Philip, the nightmarish bastard, demanded.

I felt white-hot anger sear as the six of them followed after her smaller footprints in the light laid snow. This was ridiculous for the record. One woman and our team’s several-year history can just fuck off? I stood, brushing off my suit, and turned from looking at them, examining the lonely dark forest ahead of me. I cursed as guilt hit me hard. *I’d been out of line. I knew I had.*

Fuck! The woman just infuriated me. I wanted to push her to her limits. I wanted to fucking devour her. I hated that I couldn’t read her, it kicked my

pride in the goddamn balls. All my life, the one and only thing I could rely on was my abilities. Without them? I felt off-kilter. Having the unique ability to see an individual's hopes or dreams so that I could mock and torture them with it. Because that was just demonic nature.

With Maize, I couldn't even tell you her favorite color. I felt blind and disoriented around her. Out of courtesy, I kept out of my brothers' heads. I left strangers alone because frankly, people were horrifying. Her though? Her brain I wanted to bury myself in, to figure out what the hell the woman wanted.

So we could give it to her.

My demon wasn't wrong about that…not completely.

I swallowed and looked back to where they were walking. I could catch up to them. To her. Before I knew it, I was past the group and next to her. Those gorgeous wings fluttered dangerously as she narrowed her gaze at me, keeping her pace even. I swallowed and tried to decide what the hell to say. *Just be a decent fucking person.*

"I need to talk to you," I said, feeling a bit cautious considering I'd essentially called her a possible traitor to the realm only moments ago.

Her lips tightened, "Yeah? I'm not sure there is a lot to talk about since you've been nothing but an ass to me." Her voice faltered at the end, and I wondered what she was thinking about that made her sound so sad. My demon growled, frustrated with being accused of something that was completely true. We had been an ass.

We entered through the large lobby, and I realized the guys had slowed down. I tugged her elbow and turned her towards me as she tensed. I inhaled, "I'm sorry. I'm fucking sorry about the comment regarding the Horde's inability to trust you, and my unfounded concern regarding the safety of our recruits."

Her eyes narrowed on me and searched my expression, probably looking for lies. I stared intently at her, and after a moment, she nodded, looking away. Her body seemed to deflate.

"It's fine, Charm. I know you think you're doing what's best. I don't blame you completely. *You don't know me.* You have no reason to trust me. Thanks for apologizing, though," her voice was soft and tired.

My brow dipped. I didn't try to restrain the question that popped into my head, "You're not actually leaving tomorrow, are you?"

She looked away. "I don't know what I am going to do."

“Don’t leave,” I pleaded as her eyes shot up. “I’m an ass, but they aren’t. They are great men, and I don’t say that lightly. Whether you want to realize it or not, they care about you, you should give them a chance--Maize?”

I noticed tears welling in her eyes, and she looked up at me, my jaw clenching. I winced, knowing the emotions on her face well. I’d felt them before. I saw the panic, anxiety, depression, hopelessness…all of it. My magic hit the wall of hers, naturally trying to pry into her head, so I took a chance.

“What do you want?” I whispered, needing some goddamn insight into this woman.

After a moment of decision, her magic relaxed, and she allowed me to slip through her barrier for just a moment. I hissed as her pain hit me in a tsunami, and I had to swim past it, burying myself into her deepest subconscious to see her need. Her wants. Her dreams.

I wasn’t sure what exactly I had expected to find, but it wasn’t this. I inhaled, pulling back in realization. What I saw there had me completely pausing. That was it? That was all this beautiful intelligent woman wanted? It was that simple to make her happy?

Shit.

Her eyes met mine cautiously. I knew she thought I would make fun of her, but instead, I took a chance by slipping my hand into her much smaller one gently. After a moment she detached, stepping away as her wings exploded from her back. She was off then, flying in the direction of her room as I stared at her in shock, the others’ voices queuing me into their arrival.

My demon was quiet at what we’d seen. Almost somber. The most shocking part? I understood and identified with her want. Her wish. I watched as she landed on the upper edge, and looked back down at me with curiosity before she was out of sight. I felt like I had whiplash, and frankly, had no idea what to do in this situation. I knew she hadn’t really forgiven me, but she had shown me something. If she hated me she wouldn’t have, right?

“What the hell was that?” Cannon demanded.

“An apology, asshole,” I growled, leaving them a bit shocked, because yeah, I didn’t apologize often. My brain hurt as I tried to unravel the simple picture she’d painted, my steps slow as I neared the stairs. All she’d wanted

was to be loved. To be wanted. To be accepted. It was the most simplistic and complicated thing in the world. The burden of power that she carried was like chains on her soul, and she felt hopeless for so many fucking reasons. She feared she would never have a family, and I'm not talking in terms of kids or marriage even…just a normal family. I know an odd concept for even me. A group of people to love you and accept you unconditionally? Something I didn't think would be possible until my team found me.

But we could do that. We could be her family. Even if she didn't want me, my brothers could be her new family. I shook my head at what an ass I'd been. Why the fuck hadn't I just asked her what I wanted to know? This was the shit I always got entangled in because of my temper and pride. I just had never cared about the outcome until now.

"What the hell is going on?" Valerio asked, his frustration obvious, catching up to me as I climbed the stairs.

"I was being a dick because of my pride," I grunted. "I didn't like not being able to see her. I felt blind and useless…it sucked."

"It's infuriating," he murmured in agreement.

"I asked her to show me what she wanted…and she did. Maybe you could just, I don't know…ask her?"

His jaw clenched. "I'm not sure I can handle seeing what she's afraid of. I might lose my shit."

"You do seem a bit more explosive than normal," I noted.

"She just affects me a lot." *You could say that again.*

"I can't decide if we should give her space or not," Philip offered, reaching us.

"I would, but that's just my opinion after knowing her for a year." Chait mumbled as I grinned at his cockiness.

"I went into her dreams," Philip admitted, even though I'd assumed as much when I saw him sitting outside her room, "it was bad."

"How bad?" Zed asked his voice darker than normal.

We walked down the corridor towards our room, no one willing to answer, and I frowned, realizing her door was not just open, but completely off its hinges. I swallowed and was at the door instantly, my anger surging at the sight in front of me. Fuck.

I didn't bother restraining myself, I surged forward to where she stood, her back against the window breathing roughly. Her gaze was narrowed on

the massive recruit in front of her, not queued into my presence until I let my magic knock him back. I would have been jealous, but instead, I felt possessive. Her body was caved and her wings shifting dangerously. She didn't even look scared, but I could tell she was being very cautious. I knew her control was strong but this was impressive, I would be losing my shit if anyone came into my private space, destroyed my shit, and then cornered me.

Her room was decimated. I pulled her against me as the kid stumbled back. Everything in her room was unceremoniously tossed around. The once grey tone walls now splattered with blood depicting slurs against Maize and the Dark Fae. The crimson stains stretched from the dresser to the carpeted floors, covering every surface in the epically demolished room. Her bedding was shredded to pieces, causing feather down to float around the room, the white silky texture turning dark as it landed on the floor. It was an impressive amount of damage and I knew this guy didn't do this on his own. What the hell was going on around here?

"What the fuck is this?" Valerio demanded from the recruit as the kid paled.

"I was just trying to be friendly," he explained quietly. I winced as his desires flashed through my head and rage exploded across my skin at the imagery. Motherfucker.

"Get him the fuck out of here," I growled feeling my magic wrap around Maize protectively, who had yet to utter a single sound. It was a bit terrifying.

"Tell me you did not do this," Valerio demanded as the asshole winced. I ignored it when Valerio started aggressively getting in his space along with Cannon, my eyes going down to a silent and dark-eyed Maize.

That expression on her face was horrified and blank. She breathed in sharply, and a shiver went through her as her nails bit into my forearm.

I wanted to smile when Valerio slammed the kid against the wall. The kid got whatever Valerio had in mind. He was going to take Maize anyway he could get her, even by force. Fuck him. Maybe I'd kill him if Val didn't.

"Charm," Maize's voice pitched slightly, "I need you to let go of me. Please."

Instantly, my hands were off, and she closed her eyes bringing in a shaky breath. The kid grunted as his head snapped to the side, blood streaming down his nose. I looked back down at Maize as her wings

fluttered dangerously, nearly brushing me. I wanted to touch her so fucking bad, but I also didn't have a death wish.

"Maddox," I stated urgently as he offered me an 'I've already tried.' I needed to know what the hell she was thinking. Him being blocked from his psychic abilities meant we were in complete darkness. It was like everything about her had iced over, mind and body.

"Teacup?" he knelt as she sunk to her knees staring ahead at the ground. The sounds she emitted were high pitched and panicked, she was hyperventilating.

"Please get him out of here," she whispered, mercury-like tears streaming down her face.

"Shit," Philip said in realization as he looked over at the other man, "Valerio get him out of here. Now."

He looked back at her and spoke softly as they dragged him out. "Sweetheart, you're fine. Really. He's not them, and you're not there anymore. I promise."

Oh hell.

She was having a flashback?

I watched as her lashes fluttered, and she swallowed. I watched as she shakily stood and walked towards the bathroom that was thankfully spotless. She closed it, and the lock sounded as I stared at the door, feeling my chest pulse with pain.

"She can't be alone right now," Chait murmured.

Cannon growled, "I'll sit in here all night. She's not leaving."

Would she leave? Yeah, I could see Maize taking off without a thought after this. I felt my fists tighten. *I promise you I wouldn't let our little bird go anywhere if I could help it.*

Chapter 13

Maize

I stood outside of the academy, my shadow form silently rematerializing outside the massive stone building as if I had never been there in the first place. The shadows of the night surrounded me as I considered going back, but I think deep down I knew this was the correct choice. Frankly, the only choice anymore. I'd waited one full hour until they had finally given up knocking or pleading for me to come out, then I left. I hadn't unlocked the door, I'd simply moved off from where I'd been curled up sitting on the counter. Staring blankly down at my feet, I pulled on my magic, who, unwillingly and with a lot of frustration, let me disappear.

This is what I should have done all along. Why had I ever thought I could stay here? I wasn't normal, hell, I'd been a mess since I'd arrived here, and no one deserved me at my worst. Quite frankly, I wasn't positive there was a 'best'. This was me. I was ruined. I hoped they wouldn't realize I was gone until I got a bit of a lead. Or that they wouldn't give chase, and in some ways, I knew that would be far better.

Snow floated around me, melting as soon as it touched my anger-heated skin. I turned sharply from the building, not allowing myself to look back. I could feel exhaustion riding me hard and, call me a baby, but this was all too much. Going from the occasional snide comment to this type of outright harassment and destruction of my room was a sharp slap of reality.

On their own, I could have handled the assholes that were so obviously biased against my Dark Fae heritage that they had taken it upon themselves to destroy my room. I could have even dealt with the asshole that had appeared out of nowhere as I had stood examining the destruction of my room before he cornered me. Sure, he had caused some serious flashbacks, but I could have pushed past it. Hell, I may have even been able to work through this 'mate' issue and try to come to terms with attempting intimacy again, eventually. Maybe the night terrors would have eventually gone away and stopped wrecking me completely to the core each night. But all of these factors together?

No. I was a strong woman, but this was too much, and I wasn't afraid to admit it. The worst part? I was bringing others down with me. Men that

were supposed to be people I loved and cared about. My mates. Not only was I pushing my demons onto them, but I could feel the tension riding their friendship. Shit. I mean they had literally beat up one of their students today because of me. Something that wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been around.

I was very clearly the problem here.

I brought sadness and death with me, everywhere. I inhaled sharply, the awful reality ripping me to the core as tears started to well in my eyes and drip down my cheeks. I focused my energy enough to dematerialize so that I could piece myself back together further away from the castle gates. If my father hadn't put me in iron chains I would have been able to escape far faster, but even when they'd been off and I'd tried, I'd been so drained that I'd been caught before I was successful.

The moon shone brightly in the sky, and as a stray dog barked in the cold night, I made my way towards the bridge that crossed over into the massive structure. I hated that this part was unavoidable. It wasn't even about asking for help. I just didn't want to bother her. Plus, the more people that knew… Well, the more clues there were on where I was going. My jaw clenched knowing that I probably had nothing to worry about, most likely they would give up once someone told them I was gone. Which was exactly what they should do.

"Maize?" A familiar SE soldier, Benjamin, I believe, looked at me with surprise as I realized my oddly colored tears had made their way down my cheek, nearly freezing in the cold. Luckily, the kid had always been pretty cool to me which was nice because the last thing I needed right now was to accidentally lash out and kill some asshole. I just needed to get out of here before I could do any more damage.

This was how I was going to show my loyalty and dedication to the Horde, by getting the hell out. By removing the poison I brought everywhere. By letting their commanders go back to leading the way they had before. By allowing their land to heal without a constant reminder of my father's sins.

"I need to talk to Queen Gray," I spoke in a strangled tone, trying to not let the overwhelming panic and fear roll over me from even hearing a male voice right now. I was still on edge from being cornered, and I could feel the ghost of his gross hands grabbing my arm; his large frame making me

curl against the cold glass window, trying hard to maintain control, and not kill him. Not unless I had to.

Benjamin winced, “It’s really late.” *No shit.*

“Maize?” a familiar clinical masculine voice had me looking up as I met Palo’s gaze. The man was sort of an asshole, but he was a fantastic advisor to the Queen and had pretty much several libraries worth of information at his fingertips. I was surprised to find him at the castle so late. His model-like face haunted and hollow but pretty. Dark eyes and bright red hair looking oddly relaxed, which had to mean his mate Marabella was nearby. Considering the hour I had to assume her other mate was here as well, familiar to the Queen.

All of them technically had a room in the castle, but ever since getting married last January, they had moved to a larger estate. Had it only been this past summer that Marabella had given birth to their first kid? I’d never found childbirth or children particularly appealing, but seeing how happy Marabella was with her family caused a surge of jealousy to roll through me. Making me envious of something I knew I could never have.

Marabella came out of the room following Palo. Her brow dipped in concern at something on my face before she hurried towards me, a hand pressed on her rather large stomach. I swear the woman was determined to build a small army. Well, at least, if she kept popping them out like this. Her pale blonde hair was pulled back and the familiar perfume she wore surrounded me as she pulled me into a hug.

“What’s wrong?” Marabella pulled back as I looked down at her, Palo silently waiting for my answer. I appreciated that Palo wasn’t yanking her back from me, I knew it made him nervous for her to be around me. I searched her concerned expression before I tried to talk without breaking into a mess.

“I need to leave,” I whispered in a near beg, tears leaking out of my damn eyes as a tremble took over my body, “I need a portal out of here. Please. I’ll go anywhere but here, I need Gray to portal me out of here--”

“Is it the Red Masques? Did they do something?” Palo demanded.

I was thankful to have the two of them. It only made me more sure that I needed to get out of here. I didn’t want this touching them. Palo and Taylor, one of the Queen’s husbands, were cousins to the two lead commanders in the Red Masques -- Edwin and Byron. So many people that I knew and had come to care about. I knew the best way to show my affection was to leave.

“No, just please, can I see Gray? You know I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t need this.”

Marabella nodded and Palo disappeared as she led me gingerly towards a receiving room that was far smaller than a throne room, and set up more like a library. Then she left to get me some tea despite my protests. I had my head in my hands, feeling as though I was a leaky faucet. I never cried, and lately, it seemed to be my response to everything. I hated this shit.

Gray stepped into the room, her dark blue eyes finding mine as concern marred her expression. Yeah, this amount of emotion I was showing was unusual for me, to say the least. Her veil of dark hair laid around her shoulders and the dark black silk robe she wore, not having bothered with her crown.

In many ways, I looked up to Gray, which was funny because I knew we were only a year or so apart. I couldn’t help it though, the woman carried her demons and scars with an ease and confidence I could only dream of. She had told me once that it had taken years for her to become comfortable with the silver moonlit scar that traveled down her cheekbone, but I would gladly take that compared to the ugly burns covering my back and wrists.

“What the hell is going on?” she whispered, sitting down, facing me with a quickness I appreciated. “Are you okay?”

“No,” I started shaking slightly, “I hate to ask this of you, but I need to leave, Gray. I need to get out of here… I don’t know if I can come back, I just can’t be here now.”

Gray searched my face, then reached forward, squeezing my hand. “Did someone do something? You don’t have to leave here just because of some small dick prick, Maize.”

“No,” I shook my head, not wanting to cause any more chaos, “it’s not like that. They didn’t do anything…like that. I just can’t, Gray. It’s all too much at once. I need to leave for a bit. I am only darkening people’s lives, and I bring danger with me literally anywhere I go.”

Gray inhaled, nodded and then asked quietly. “The lead commanders?”

My eyes watered as I looked up, willing them to go away. “They are my mates... They deserve better than that. Than me.”

Gray squeezed my hand and spoke softly after a minute. “You’re wrong. You are a survivor, Maize. You survived three years of torture and

imprisonment. You have already healed so much from when I met you. But, with that said, of course, I will give you somewhere to go."

"I'll go anywhere," I said immediately, I just needed an out.

Her brow dipped in thought. "I have a place that is essentially in the middle of nowhere. It's cold this time of year though, but it may give you the peace you are looking for."

"That would be amazing," I whispered thankfully.

Gray nodded and closed her eyes, a dark orb forming in her hand before splitting into two marble-like forms. I closed my hand around both of them as she offered them to me.

"One is going to send you there, when you want to come back, just use the other."

"What if I never want to come back?" I couldn't bring my eyes up from where I was staring miserably at the small circular balls.

Gray hummed softly and pressed a hand to my shoulder, making me look up to find true empathy in her gaze. "When my guard first found me, I was overwhelmed. Freaked the fuck out, and felt like they were trying to take over my life. I didn't understand why I was letting them, and it was just…a lot. So I pushed back. Three days after meeting them, I picked up and left in the middle of the day without a word."

"Why?" I asked intently.

She smiled sadly. "I felt like they knew too much about me. It made me vulnerable, and I was worried that the secrets I had would make them hate me. Because around them, I felt everything when I was so used to feeling nothing. So I left for three weeks. I came back though. I couldn't stay away, and to this day, I regret losing even those days with them. You will always have a place at this castle, Maize, no matter what else is going on outside of it. Always."

"Thank you," I nodded as a big fat tear rolled down my face. "Please don't tell them where I went."

Despite not knowing much, Gray nodded, and I slipped one of the beads into the jacket I wore. Her voice was a bit more informal, allowing both of us to relax a bit from the heavy tone. "There is a woman, Alexa, who directs the entire estate. She will answer any questions you have about Earth. Anything you need, ask for it, okay?"

After a sharp nod, I inhaled and closed my hand around the orb, feeling weak. I was running. No matter what I said, I was fucking running. Still, my

moment of hesitation was overshadowed by the memory of that asshole looming over me today. My hand clenched defensively, and the orb broke as black liquid seeped through my fingers.

I fell into the darkness of the void.

Chapter 14

Chait

I ran my fingers on the scars that circled each wrist from years of captivity, a habit when I was stressed that developed a year after being freed from my ‘owner.’ My wrist began to hurt as I pressed harder staring blankly at the empty bathroom.

I should have predicted this.

Chaos was ensuing around me after about three hours of quiet following Maize’s retreat into her bathroom. I couldn’t hear any of it, though, because *mon amour* was gone. The door of the bathroom was lying in the mess of her destroyed room, and Valerio was yelling about her being gone as Maddox tried to reason with him. We both knew that no amount of searching would find Maize if she didn’t want to be found.

“She can’t just fucking leave,” Valerio snarled his ears red with anger, his magic vibrating the room. I hadn’t been surprised when he’d been impatient and blown off the door. I had expected he wouldn’t have lasted more than an hour, so three was impressive.

“But she did, and we can’t go dragging her back--” Maddox started, rarely one to be invested enough to have an opinion, but Valerio didn’t care, and frankly, it was funny seeing the man losing his cool. Well, would be funny if it didn’t involve the woman I was fucking crazy about.

“I don’t give a hell what she wants, she’s coming back!” Valerio snarled, looking practically frantic as he stormed from the room.

“I’m going to make sure he doesn’t kill anyone,” Cannon mumbled looking confused, his hand pulling on his hair, casting one last glance at the bathroom.

Maddox offered me a dark pained look as he sat on her ruined bed, and pushed his hands through his hair looking down.

“Why?” Zed asked, his eyes wide, and I couldn’t stare at him too long because the man looked fucking heartbroken. Bloody hell.

“Because we pushed her,” Philip said softly, looking dazed from where he sat on the window seat looking over the state of her room. I was going to kill the kids who did this. I knew it wasn’t the only reason she left, but it was the tipping point.

Charm was quiet, pain lancing his features despite trying to hide it. I closed my eyes, feeling around the spirit realm that covered the Horde like a blanket, seeing absolutely no sign of the butterfly woman that usually stood out to me. Her energy was soft silver with streaks of blue, pink, and purple in it. I had been so damn worked up about that asshole kid that I'd forgotten to keep tabs on her for a minute too long. Forgotten how Maize had looked before she had locked herself in that bathroom.

Gone.

Cannon appeared in the doorway, "Her scent leads towards the castle. Valerio has already left, I could use some help."

Everyone moved from the room at different levels of speed, and I followed last, walking next to Maddox as we trailed down six flights and out into the cold silent night. My eyes steadied on the figures of my team ahead of me but didn't bother to try to stop their fruitless mission. I knew they needed this.

I swallowed as I tried to not overthink how intensely this was bothering me. After we found her, then I could handle it. Only then. Then I would need to come to terms with how exactly I felt about all of this, and more importantly, *her.*

Honestly, as we neared the castle I began to wonder if Maize would even want to come back. Afterall, she left for a reason. Maddox, someone I considered my brother, more so than the others even, was staring at the ground with a distressed look on his face. When I'd heard he had kissed her, I'd been jealous. But more jealous that I hadn't been there in the moment with the three of us. I felt like we were far more complete with Maize between us, whether it be a hug or hopefully, one day soon, way more. My cock twitched at that thought, and I shook my head. She wasn't even here, and she was turning me on.

The castle guard was talking quietly to someone that seemed to be taking over his shift. Valerio approached him, and I closed my eyes knowing this was going to be a goddamn disaster.

You see, Valerio was a lot of things, but out of control wasn't usually one of them. Maize elicited a strong reaction in me but in him, he was like a different person. I could see the anger and panic on his face at the thought of her being gone. I nearly chuckled at that. Despite his attempt to distance himself, I saw the way he watched her…literally constantly. He always had tabs on her, and it wasn't until he realized she was out at a pub with other

soldiers that the crazy switch flipped. If this wasn't all so pressing, it would be funny.

"Where the hell is she?" He slammed the guard up against the wall as Cannon put a hand on the other's chest to hold him back. This was going to end poorly.

"Who?" the guard snarled. I'd seen him before but couldn't for the life of me remember his name.

"Maize, she trained with you until recently," Zed offered, his voice rough as if it hurt him to talk.

The kids' eyes widened and then narrowed. "Are you the fucking reason she showed up at the palace gates crying tonight?"

Valerio dropped the kid and stepped away, shaking with tension. After twenty-seven years of being calm and collected, this was the shit that would break him. I was already broken. Broken and in love with a woman who clearly didn't want to be with us. The reality left a heavy weight on my chest, making it hard to breathe.

"Where is she now?" Philip demanded, his jaw tense.

"She had an audience with Queen Gray, I have no idea," the man offered, looking disgusted with us, making me want to punch him.

Before any of us could say anything, a door opened and my eyebrows raised. Queen Gray, and two of her men, Rhodes and Adyen, walked out at the end of the long hallway. I knew there was a waiting room near the throne room, so clearly they had met there. Immediately, she looked up, and something passed on her face as she looked at both of her husbands walking towards us. Both guards paled in her presence, but that didn't surprise me too much, the woman was terrifying.

"What can I help you with, commanders?" she spoke quietly, despite her serious face there was a flicker of amusement in her gaze. She knew exactly why we were here.

Valerio stayed silent, and I knew he didn't trust himself. I spoke softly. "We're looking for Maize, Your Majesty."

She hummed, looking unsurprised, and searched our faces. "She's gone."

I winced as Valerio hit the stone wall with the side of his hand, ignoring the snarl that came from Adyen. I closed my eyes and hoped he would keep it together. You know, so we didn't get our necks snapped or something along those lines.

“Where did she go?” Cannon asked evenly.

“She told me not to say,” Gray said, not looking fully as though she agreed with the decision.

Then Charm out of all people spoke, “We need to make sure she’s okay. She was nearly attacked by one of our academy recruits, and her room was destroyed tonight. I know she ran because she was freaking out, but she shouldn’t be alone. Not right now.”

Gray searched our expressions and looked up at Rhodes. He offered her a small smile. “You know my opinion, it would have helped a lot if someone had told me where you had disappeared to for three weeks.”

“The Earth realm,” she stated softly after a moment, “I won’t tell you where, you have to figure that out on your own. I am only telling you this because I know Maize is self-exiling herself due to unnecessary guilt. So make sure you know exactly what you want when you go find her, or else it will make her far more confused.”

I knew exactly what I wanted when it came to Maize.

“We need a portal then,” Zed muttered.

Gray mumbled something under her breath that sounded like, ‘I need some fucking sleep and coffee to deal with this shit.’ Instead, she closed her eyes and formed in her hand seven small black orbs that were marble size. As those were passed out, she created seven more. I rolled mine in my hands, thinking just how large the Earth realm was.

“I’m going to bed,” Gray sighed and shook her head, “you boys better not screw up. Rhodes, honey, could you show them to the map room, let them decide how they want to split up.” I was thanking the maker there were so many of us, and thankful she offered us the ability to portal there and back, that was a lot to ask of someone with her power level.

Rhodes kissed her forehead, and Adyen offered him a goading smile as he shook his head, stalking down the hall as we followed. I spoke softly so Valerio could hear me. “Do not break them until we figure out where we want to go. If we fuck this up, we’ll never be able to find her. Earth isn’t small.”

Once inside a massive room, Rhodes spread out a map of Earth, and then he looked up at us. After seeing something, he muttered under his breath. Turning towards a stack of files, he pulled out a silver folder.

“Why do you need to find her?” he asked suddenly, not offering the odd folder he held.

When none of us answered, he shook his head and spoke softly, “If this is a mistake, and Maize gets hurt, and my wife gets pissed at you, and then at me for handing off these coordinates, I will kill you. Understand? I don’t like when she’s mad at me, she ignores me and shite.”

I nearly chuckled at that. He continued, “Gray owns properties throughout the Earth realm. I have no idea where Maize is at, but I know it’s in the states.”

“There are eight properties?” Cannon asked, looking over a slim sheet of coordinates.

“Hope you guess the right ones, not my bloody problem if you don’t - good luck.”

Then the English bastard was gone, and Valerio scanned the paper looking as though he was assuming control. I listened as he chose each place for us based on the map, and I mumbled the state I was going to under my breath. *New York.* Was that the one that smelled a bit? Possibly. I hadn’t spent a ton of time there before. Luckily, we had cell-like devices that allowed us to stay in contact when we go on missions, despite us rarely going on them nowadays.

“If one of us finds her, you need to immediately call,” Valerio instructed looking at each one of us. “I don’t want to spend more time there than necessary.”

“What if she doesn’t want to come back, we can’t force her,” I stated honestly.

Valerio clenched his jaw, “We will fucking figure it out after we find her.”

Closing my eyes I imagined where I was going, and as the darkness shadowed around me, I felt myself fall through space. I really hoped we found her soon. I needed the strength she gave me without even realizing it. I needed the touch of her hands that calmed me, even in just a goddamn hand hold. I just fucking needed her.

Maybe then I could tell her just how important she’d become to me.

Tell her that I love her.

Chapter 15

Maize

Gray hadn’t been wrong. This was in the middle of nowhere but in the best way possible.

When I’d arrived last night, I’d all but crashed outside of the house like a goddamn asteroid, probably scaring the crap out of Alexa, the estate director, who had been standing outside on the large porch waiting, for me I assume.

I swore, rolling over as the cold stone surface underneath me had me grimacing. I grumbled and sat up, noticing that there was snow on all sides of the stone-laid path I was on. I inhaled, the scent of pine and fresh snow surrounded me, the pure silence of the place making me forget that there was a massive house in front of me with a woman waiting patiently. Could you blame me? The open skies were cloudless, the night cool and to all sides was open expansive lands with some higher hills and mountains in the distance. It almost seemed alien to me, considering the little traveling I’d done. When the woman cleared her throat, I drew my attention to her.

“Hi,” I stood up brushing myself off, knowing I looked like a mess. “Gray offered for me to stay--”

“I know, dear,” she offered a small amused smile and motioned for me to walk up onto the porch. I finally looked over the large estate. It honestly reminded me of a log cabin...times one hundred, because it was massive. It distracted me long enough that when a surge of pain went through my chest, I was taken off guard a bit. It was like I’d forgotten why I was running away. Walking up the stairs, snow crunching under my feet, the woman held the large door open for me as the warmth of the house instantly collapsed around me.

My eyes widened at the tall ceilings, comfortable-looking furniture and roaring fireplaces. Pillows and blankets were everywhere, and the scent of something cooking had my stomach tightening, but I wasn’t positive if that was hunger or nausea from portaling. The woman spoke directly while leading me towards a massive staircase. “My name is Alexa, Gray didn’t give me your name, but I received quick notice we would be having a guest, so I assumed she’d sent you. What’s your name?”

“We?” I asked confused before I shook my head. “Sorry, it’s Maize. I didn’t mean to be rude…I’m having an odd night.”

She nodded as we walked up the steps. “I live here with my two sons and husband, I am the estate manager, but they run the lands surrounding it.” The thought of family had a dull, hollow feeling radiating in my chest. I couldn’t believe I’d shown Charm my desire so openly. I think I’d been waiting for him to fuck shit up, but instead he’d made me feel as though what I wanted wasn’t stupid.

“Where are we?” I whispered.

“North Dakota, a tiny little town about ten miles away and nothing else in sight.” She offered peace as we walked down a hall, passed closed doors, and finally came to a large suite at the end of the hallway. My eyebrows went up as she walked into the room, the cream and gold color bedding, cozy fireplace and couch that made me immediately feel at home. Feeling relaxed. Alexa began explaining that there were clothes in the closet and that if I wanted I could take one of the horses out tomorrow on the ranch. I loved that idea until it was spoiled thinking about how I’d left my bow and arrow, the gift from Gray, at the academy. If, of course, it hadn’t been destroyed.

“Thank you,” I offered softly as she nodded and turned to leave, closing the door behind her. I stared at the door for a few seconds in thought and appreciation that Gray would give this to me. Although, I was finding myself thankful that she’d offered me that secondary portal because this hollow feeling in my chest was growing larger.

But I knew I shouldn’t. I just needed to stay away for a few days, then it wouldn’t hurt as much. I wasn’t dumb. I obviously had started to feel something for the others…Maddox and Chait felt far more like heart-break. I stilled at that thought and realized that the idea of never seeing the two of them again had me feeling dizzy. I tried to clear my head. Shrugged off my jacket and dimmed the lights. Not now. Tomorrow. I could think about it all tomorrow.

This space was what I had needed. Just a tiny bit of space. Just some breathing room. That’s all this was, because if I considered the implication of never seeing them ever again.. Well, it started to feel like something was devouring me inside out.

Walking towards the window, I stood to examine the massive property we were on as snow began to twirl quietly from the sky. This type of peace

was damn therapeutic. I turned towards the attached bathroom and stripped, smiling at the shower they had. A glass square box with a million jets that had me sighing in relief as I stood underneath the rain-like water stream. My body warmed, and as I stood there for nearly an hour, my mind, without permission, went towards my boys.

No. Not my boys.

My body didn't agree with that and I groaned, hating that even while not around, they could affect me. I shivered, thinking about Maddox's lips on me. But not just his…there were so many images going through my head, and I could feel myself getting wet as my nipples tightened.

I shouldn't be getting off on men I couldn't risk thinking about.

That didn't stop me from rubbing my clit and slipping a finger inside of myself, whimpering at the fantasy of one of them behind me in this very shower, sliding into me as I gripped the tiled wall. Each of them taking turns with me in a … is there a word for an 8-some? Almost like a fucking hair trigger, I let out a muffled cry as a small climax rolled over my skin, providing only a little relief. Not nearly as much as they could, no doubt… shit, I needed to stop. Of course, my sexual drive didn't, and hadn't, agreed since we met them. It was like we had forgotten we could get turned on, but the minute I had locked eyes with Maddox and Chait almost a year ago… I knew that time was over. Ever since I'd been at the academy, I'd rarely gotten alone time, but at the castle when I couldn't fall asleep…I could admit to having spent quite a few nights, as in most, thinking about what it would feel like to be surrounded by Chait and Maddox. Their hands everywhere and lips trailing my skin.

Telling myself that would be the last time that I thought about them like that, I stepped from the shower and dried off. I ran my fingers over the scars on my wrist and the odd texture of them. When I was done, I brushed out my hair and then my teeth before making my way towards the large closet to easily find a dresser with shorts and t-shirts in them. I locked the door and crawled into bed, the night collapsing over me.

I'd slept nearly without nightmares the night before and woke up feeling oddly refreshed. So much so, that I'd found myself exploring the estate while drinking a cup of coffee Alexa had offered me while introducing Cal, her husband. The gruff man, who legitimately had a cowboy hat on, shook my hand and told me that I could go down to the stables to get one of the

horses out since their sons would be cleaning them out today anyway. So I had.

Well, first I'd changed into fleece-lined pants and riding gear that was good for this weather. My hair had waved a bit in sleep and laid around my face as I walked toward the barn that was absolutely massive. My first thought had been, *I guess they had a lot of horses*?

"We train and house them for others that live around here," a gruff voice had me turning, realizing I'd said that out loud. I offered a small smile to a human male that looked over me curiously before meeting my gaze again. "I am guessing you aren't Gray?"

"You've never met her?" I asked curiously. "But no, I'm not. My name is Maize."

Much like his father, he was a big guy with warm eyes and a thick dark beard. In human years I would put him around twenty-five maybe? Something about the man made me smile, though, sort of like the Smith twins. My chest clenched. Two more people I would never see again.

"Name's Fred. Have you ever ridden before?" he asked as I followed him down towards the barn. The man was very much all business. I liked that about him.

"Yes," I nodded because that was an understatement.

His eyes narrowed slightly, and I smiled wondering why he didn't believe me. Music played as a voice sang to a song I didn't recognize. I did laugh as we came to a guy that was nearly the same size as Fred, but far more playful, dancing and singing as he pointed at one of the horses. At the sound of my laugh, he whipped around, turning bright pink.

Fred shook his head, "Maize, this is my younger brother Mikey."

"Nice to meet you," I offered as he shut off the music and offered a hand.

"You wanted to ride?" Mikey asked eagerly.

"I don't know the area well, but I thought it would be fun." Which I needed. When was the last time I'd done something for pure enjoyment? My thoughts instantly flashed to several incidents in the past few days that I could consider.

"I'll take her out on the trail," Fred offered and looked around. "This first section is all owned by Gray, pick anyone you want."

I grinned, looking at the horse he'd been singing to, "Definitely that one." Fred laughed at his brother's expense, but I found myself relaxing just

a bit. This wasn’t perfect, but for right now, I think this was what I needed.

As Fred and I trailed back, we talked aimlessly and I found myself enjoying his company. He had explained a bit how he was hoping to eventually get a place of his own in the nearby town because his girlfriend was living there. Although, he was waiting to ask her to marry him because he was saving up for a ring. It was sweet and very human, distracting me from the incessant gnawing pain that grew the more time I spent from my mates.

My magic was depressed as hell, and I didn’t bother using any because, while I assumed Alexa was aware of the supernatural world, I didn’t want to cause waves with the rest of her family. Mikey had taken the horse from me after helping me down, darting his eyes away while blushing, clearly not fully comfortable around me. I didn’t blame him…I’d been called intense before. I know, that was shocking, right?

After saying goodbye to the boys, I walked up to the main house, finding that the late afternoon sun was warmer than I’d expected. I slipped upstairs and let out a yawn, wishing I could fall asleep…but why couldn’t I?

I stilled, walking into my room and frowned, realizing that the room felt off. Looking around, I shook my head, believing I was being paranoid. I tugged off my jacket and boots, undressing until I had a bra and underwear on only. Crawling towards the bed and inhaling, noting it smelled familiar. Not familiar enough that it freaked me out, but it did settle something inside of me, making me sink into the bed fully. Instantly, my eyes closed and I fell asleep to the afternoon sun on my face.

It wasn’t until hours later that I found it in me to open my eyes. Groaning quietly in the now dark of my room, I rolled myself up…and froze.

“Holy shit.”

In the corner of the room, in a large comfortable chair with a small lamp on, was fucking Valerio. What the hell? Clearly, I was terrible at hiding. Only I would literally leave a realm and still be found less than twenty-four hours later. I nearly rolled my eyes at myself while at the same time my heart sped up because seeing Valerio across the room from me? It created a storm-like symphony inside of me.

“Sleep well?” he asked, his jaw clenched as he watched me with a predatory gaze. I wanted to be pissed, but instead, my body heated and I

shifted, pulling the covers up slightly to avoid running over to him. My magic was thrilled despite how pissed he was.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered, his eyes narrowed and he stood, his large frame at the side of the bed in a snap. My gaze ate up his purple hair and dark eyes, distracting me enough that I let out an actual squeak as Valerio gripped my jaw and continued to search my face.

“You left,” he said mournfully and I winced at the hurt I saw there. “Why did you run?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I confessed, trying to preserve any pride I had left at this point, “I just needed out.”

Valerio didn’t like that answer, clearly, and was over me as I laid pressed into the bed, oddly feeling not as ‘trapped’ as I would have assumed. I think that was because of him. I knew he wouldn’t hurt me, not physically -- emotionally was another story. His grip on my jaw tightened as he spoke quietly. “You don’t get a fucking ‘out’ Maize. That isn’t how this works.”

“Gray let me go. I am not in ‘containment’ anymore,” I breathed out quietly.

His growl caught me off guard, “You fucking *know* that’s not what I’m talking about.”

My jaw clenched, refusing to talk in coded language about this shit. “No I don’t, Valerio.”

“So we aren’t your goddamn mates?” He arched a brow looking a bit smug as my eyes widened. Nevermind, I would like to go back to when we weren’t being blunt, please.

“Did Maddox tell you?” I demanded.

His eyes narrowed, “No, Maize. I didn’t need Maddox to tell me. You think this connection happens often? I’ve been alive for twenty-seven years and have never once felt like I did when I saw you. It doesn’t take a genius to put it together.”

I swallowed, “It doesn’t really matter--”

“Stop saying that,” he demanded sharply.

“No,” I bit out, “I can say whatever the fuck--”

I let out a surprised sound that turned into a moan as Valerio growled against my lips. His midnight rain taste and smell surrounded me. My walls collapsed in relief as his magic fucking swarmed me. I gave into it, hoping this was some elaborate dream. It didn’t stop me from delving my fingers

into his thick hair as he groaned against me, my tongue running the seam of his lips and exploring his mouth. I hitched a leg around his hip as his hard length pressed against my center, making my clit pulse. Heady desire ran over me and I whimpered as his mouth worked its way down my neck and body.

“Shit, you feel so good,” he snarled, his hand snapping the thin center of my bra, as I hissed his hot mouth closed around my hard nipple. I gripped the bedding as frustration welled up inside of me, my hips grinding against him on their own accord.

“Valerio,” I moaned softly as he chuckled at my frustration. The man easily slipping off my lace underwear and tossing them to the side without thought. Honestly, this was a new side of him that I was loving. I was so engrossed in his touch that I was authentically confused when he brought my legs over his shoulders and trailed kisses down my stomach. I whimpered as his lips met my wet center. I cried out his name as he dipped his tongue into me and rubbed a thumb over my clit. My legs closed slightly as I arched back, and he pressed down on my thighs.

“Do not close your legs to me,” he demanded with a thread of anger, I nodded as his tongue moved into and out of me and he began to devour me like I was his last fucking meal. My legs fell open as his hands tightened on my hips, probably leaving fingerprints from his grip. I felt my eyes flutter shut as he slid a finger inside of me making my thighs shake. Finally, I gave in and let them fall open completely. I let out a cry as my climax built, tugging on his hair had his movements quickening and more intense. Holy shit, this man was far too good with his tongue.

“Fuck!” I cried out as a climax, far stronger than yesterday, and fucking mind-blowing blasted me to the point that my eyes actually rolled back slightly as the room spotted black in relief. My clit pulsed in the after wave of breaking as he lapped up my release, taking his time as if that was all he wanted to do today was be in between my legs. It was hot. I was a huge fan. He could spend all goddamn day there if he wanted…

Kissing up my body, the man caged me. Dipping his lips at my throat as he sucked hard, making me wince before he nipped my bottom lip in what felt like punishment. When he looked down at me it was with lust and a lot of searing heat.

“You are coming back to the fucking Horde, baby.”

That was when reality hit me square in the face.

Shit.

I couldn’t go back. Nothing had changed. I was still me.

“Stop,” he snapped, “Whatever you are thinking, you’re wrong.”

I put a hand on his chest, pushing, but he just grabbed my wrists and pulled them above my body, searching my expression with determination. I spoke softly but with truth, “Valerio, you have no idea what you’re talking about. Being around all of you is putting you, my damn *mates*, at risk. I’m a monster.”

“What the hell are you afraid of?” he pressed, and I realized I was going to have to show him. I hated that. I hated that I would lose him.

“I’ll show you,” I relaxed my walls as his magic flooded in, and with resignation, I let the memories flow. Everything from when I’d first had sex and first killed a man, to my countless night terrors. What was I afraid of? How about -- what *wasn’t* I afraid of?

I was afraid of never being able to love someone properly or be loved. I was afraid of ruining the lives of those I loved. I was afraid of giving my heart to someone and having them reject me. I was fucking afraid of being afraid, and I was losing myself in it.

“Maize,” Valerio demanded, shaking me as my eyes flew open and I could feel the wet tears on my face as I stared up at him, the horror etched into his face from the memories of my own father abusing me, to guards kicking me around. But I knew it was more than that. Now he knew. He knew I could kill him.

“See?” I whispered. “Do you understand?”

“I understand that you will *never* go through something like that again,” his voice was soft and deadly. Alright, I think I liked angry and swearing. “I understand that you're scared but that doesn’t mean self-isolation is the key, Maize.”

“I killed someone, not some asshole either - someone that I was sleeping with. The first and only person I’ve slept with died underneath me. I’m a fucking monster.”

His lips seared to mine as he gripped my face with both hands, forcing me to focus solely on him. “You are not a monster, Maize. I know monsters, and you are not one of them, baby. You’ve just had a really shitty hand dealt to you, but you don’t have to live like that.”

“And if I kill one of you?” I demanded.

“You won’t,” Valerio vowed. “If your magic lashes out we will just deal with the consequences of removing the poison.”

I stared at him in shock as I just shook my head, mumbling under my breath and feeling really out of it. “I don’t know what to say to you.”

“Don’t say anything except yes,” he said softly, his eyes lightning to purple. “Come back home. Give this a chance, and don’t be a coward, Maize. It’s easy to keep running and way fucking harder to stick around.”

I scowled at the word ‘coward’ despite him being right. I inhaled and looked up, feeling oddly at peace with all of this. He wasn’t giving me a choice, and in some ways, I needed that. I needed him to tell me to stay around, to force me to deal with the truth. *Only you would run away for one day.* Or I had *wanted* them to come for me, which brought me to...

“I didn’t even know you liked me,” I mumbled.

Valerio chuckled softly, his smile wicked, and I realized why he was usually stoic…his smile was legitimately a weapon. The man was beautiful, but when he smiled? Holy shit. I stared at him a bit stunned, feeling as though I hadn’t seen him clearly until this moment. My pulse went wild as I swallowed, trying to focus back on him.

“Like you?” Valerio asked softly, his eyes darkening. “I don’t think that’s intense enough for how I feel, but if you want to label it that way, feel free.”

I clenched my jaw. “You confuse me.”

“*I* confuse *you*?” He arched a brow, “Maize you’re the hardest person I know to read. When you don’t want someone in your head, it’s like hitting into a 100-foot thick block of ice.”

“Has to be that way sometimes,” I whispered.

His eyes melted as he lifted one of my hands and kissed my wrist gently. Before I could comment, the man was pulling the covers over us and wrapping his arms around me. I shivered in relief, “I’m scared to sleep next to someone. I usually have terrible night terrors.”

“I know,” he mumbled, kissing my temple. “You won’t hurt me, Maize. You need to trust that we can take care of ourselves.”

“I trust you,” I stated softly, and I realized it was true. I did trust Valerio, even if it was new. Whatever the hell this was. My eyes closed, forgetting to even ask where the others were.

Chapter 16

Valerio

Well, this hadn’t gone anything like I’d assumed.

Although to be fair, I hadn’t been positive about what I’d expected. To have to drag her back over my shoulder? Possibly. To have to resist the urge to spank her ass cherry red for thinking she could leave us? Absolutely. I shook my head looking down at her small sleeping form. I had contacted the other men and they were portaling here since we could all portal within realms just not across them. I needed to get my fucking head on straight before they arrived because my not so secret fixation on this woman wasn’t very hide-able anymore.

Although I’d managed for three days.

Something about her at a pub with other men, and thinking about how we really had no claim to her, made me snap. I felt pissed and overwhelmed, enough so that I hadn’t put a lot of thought into my action until she was over my shoulder. Then I realized she could have killed me, and that turned me on which shows there is clearly something wrong with me. Right? Although none of that was compared to the feeling of realizing she had just upped and left.

The first feeling that had gone through me hadn’t been anger.

I’d felt instead like I’d been punched in the gut. The idea of never seeing her face again or the tiny smile she offered when she found something funny, but wasn’t trying to, devastated me. I couldn’t help but respect her strength, but I also had the urge to wrap her up and shield her from any of the shit she's gone through… Fears and nightmares that I was now queued into. I knew I shouldn’t have seen them, because the raging fury under my skin had no outlet. No one to kill because the bastard was dead.

I hadn’t been surprised that she had recognized us as mates, and I didn’t mind sharing her with the others…I had expected that in our future. What I did mind? The distance she kept trying to keep. I knew she felt like she was a monster, and I felt like it was my job to prove her wrong. Despite trying to hide it, I saw the good in Maize.

I saw the loyalty she had. I saw the way she tried to keep her problems from others, not wanting to affect their lives. I saw the way she watched families and the way they interacted with one another, wanting the simplest fucking thing in the world. To be cared about. Yeah, Charm had told me that one. This was why I hadn't hesitated for a moment to go after her because I knew it would prove that I more than wanted her around. I wanted her to look at me the way she looked at Chait and Maddox. Yeah, I had known they were hanging out with someone at the castle, and I was fucking wishing I'd pressed who it had been. Then I could have had this entire past year learning about her.

I grunted, knowing I had made a terrible first impression but my reaction had been intense and automatic. I'd tried to push myself into her mind, and she had kept me out, making me want her even more. I put my head back and ran my tongue over my lip still tasting her and my hard cock twitched, no doubt pissed that I wasn't inside her. Especially my magic. My magic was livid that we weren't fucking her for the rest of the night, but rationally I knew it wasn't the time, and the others would be here soon. Didn't stop me from looking over her hot lean form, pressed against me in just lace. My hand trailed gently on her scars that lined her back like three dark lines, and she shivered in her sleep, her soft pink lips tightening. My hands couldn't help but run over the skin of her waist, loving how soft she felt under my fingers. Like goddamn silk. I buried my nose in her hair as she sighed in her sleep, a small smile forming on her lips. I wanted to see her smile and laugh more. The way her eyes had lit upon seeing my smile made me realize that maybe I needed to as well.

Maize whimpered as I pulled her up slightly so that her head was on my chest and I was holding her tightly, my eyes scanning the window, waiting to feel the magic of my team enter the estate. Hopefully, they wouldn't scare the humans. Actually, they could go kill the two young guys. I didn't like how they were looking at Maize at all. Especially the younger one.

When a pulse of power popped into the air, I looked up to find both Maddox and Chait there. Chait's eyes instantly focused on her, and he breathed out a sigh of relief, moving onto the bed while wrapping an arm around her, not giving a shit how close that put us. Then again, on missions, we'd been in a whole lot of more uncomfortable positions.

Maddox narrowed his eyes, "Why the hell are you in bed with her?"

I arched a brow as he snapped his eyes away, not pushing it. He wasn't dumb, and he knew I wasn't going to put up with this new snappy bullshit. Maddox was usually more collected and really, I got the change because it was Maize, but still. I wasn't fucking dealing with it. Maize was an adult, and anything that did happen between us was between us. Well unless she wanted more than one of us at a time…

"Really? North fucking Dakota?" Charm demanded, popping in right as Cannon did. Instantly the latter was leaning over us, looking over Maize with concern. The man was always worried about everyone on our team. It probably came from having to raise his little brother himself. I also had a feeling that her leaving was going to fuck with him more than he cared to admit because of his mom. I hoped that wouldn't be the case and that he could see the large difference between why Maize left and how this was far different than when his mother left his brother and him, but abandonment issues were called that for a reason.

Charm leaned against the wall and didn't say anything, his eyes on her with a small scowl. He had somehow worked it in his head to be mad at her for leaving. I could just tell the two of them were going to be a mess. I also knew they were going to fuck and probably really soon. I closed my eyes thoughtfully remembering her memory.

I knew there was a good chance that she could almost kill one of us if her control slipped, but I also was okay with the consequences of her pulling the poison out of me. I hoped the others felt similar. My magic had already silently wrapped around her, branded her, both of her familiars entertaining the notion completely. She probably didn't even realize how intertwined the two of us were, and I hadn't given her an option to know. It was magic after all, who was I to stop it?

Philip was there then, his hair messy and eyes red slightly from a lack of sleep. He seemed to relax slightly on seeing her. I felt bad for the man because Philip, despite his reputation, wore his feelings on his sleeve, and I think Maize may have hurt him a bit when she kept him from her room. Not that I blamed her since she didn't know any of us, but it didn't make it not true. I don't think it helped his obsession with her, but I could see how cautious he was around her. In some ways, the two of them were far more similar than one would assume.

Zed was the last to pop into the room, and his eyes lightened in relief and then surprise. "Did you two fuck?"

“No,” I shook my head at his blunt nature as he nodded in understanding and sat on the bed, laying back and wrapping a hand around her ankle. I think I found his reaction the oddest because it was so the opposite of Zed in every way.

“So what did she say?”

“A lot,” I murmured back to Philip’s question. “She’s coming back with us, and I told her to give the whole mate thing a fucking try before running away from it.”

“What?” Charm snapped as I tried to figure out what he was upset about now. Oh.

Shit. I sighed, “She’s pure fae. She has a mate, well mate-s in this case, that’s us by the way if you didn’t already know.”

“Why didn’t she tell us?” Charm looked panicked as I tried to not be amused by his reaction.

“She didn’t want you to act how you were ‘supposed to’, most likely, although it could have also been fear.”

“Don’t worry, Charm, now you don’t have to hide being an ass,” Maddox chuckled softly.

“I apologized,” Charm muttered, and I wasn’t positive what it was about the mate thing, but it seemed to really upset him. Not in the ‘feeling guilty’ or ‘don’t want to be mates’ aspect either. It was very odd.

“So if we’re her mates…does that mean she wants to stay or feels like she has to?” Cannon asked quietly.

“I think it’s clear that she doesn’t feel like she has to stay, so if she comes back it’s her choice,” Chait whispered, his eyes closed. Zed was already sleeping and the only one that hadn’t said anything was Philip.

“She better stay.” Philip muttered, “Not making this fucking mistake again.”

I wouldn’t put it past him to handcuff himself to her. Really.

“Should we wake her up or sleep here?” Someone asked, but I was already too focused on her. Those eyelids stayed shut, and she let out a soft sigh seemingly content. I wondered if it was helping her sleep, being around us. I didn’t know how the mating aspect affected her, besides the obvious.

Within minutes. my team had shifted and fell asleep throughout the room, creating silence except for our slow breathing. I kept my eyes closed but didn’t bother to try to stop myself from bathing in the comfortability. I

hadn’t been lying about us being a family. We didn’t make sense together, like a lot of the teams, but we were all misfits. None of us fit in how we should, except with each other.

Most naturalistic mages, like myself, couldn’t shift into an animal for long. At least, not one that was a part of them like actual shifters. If they did, it was usually a predator of some kind, which was why my ability to shift into a raven had never been exactly respected in the mage community. That was fine by me. It was a secondary magic as far as I was concerned, one that only existed because of my mother. My father, who I had never actually met, was rumored to have been from the God realm. So I was betting on a demi-god of fear or terror, possibly from the Greek-influenced community. I had no urge to find out and my mother didn’t either.

That was another reason I had suggested coming out of the field after a few years of doing missions. My mother, the only family I had, was sick. I’m not talking normal sick either. I think the closest thing it would be related to on Earth would be a cancer of the lungs, but we didn’t have an origin for it. It just was there, and through my connections, I’d been able to get her in a permanent place in the medical wing of the castle, despite the healing mages only being able to stop growth, not get rid of current growth. I made sure I got to see her at least once a week which, she no doubt, found too little and would complain to me about. I smiled, wondering if it would freak Maize out if I brought her with me. I was terrible at gauging her reactions to things so I hoped that changed with time.

At twenty-two, the woman seemed far older, and despite being haunted, I didn’t think that was necessarily a bad fit for our team. We had seen a lot of crazy shit throughout the years, all of us having joined the Red Masques upon inception despite Edwin being slightly younger than myself. We were in the field until about three years ago when I’d been twenty-four. I think at the time of quitting, Zed and Maddox had both turned twenty-three and Chait twenty-two, so all four of us were fucking *over* missions. Cannon had been around nineteen so he’d been disappointed, but not nearly as bad as Philip and Charm who had been eighteen and only had a year in the field. I think after some time they realized it was a better fit for us teaching at the academy, and since taking over, it had been only growing in size. It had also given me a purpose, my eyes fluttered down to Maize knowing that any plans I had would be altered slightly because of her, and I didn’t mind one damn bit.

I looked down at her lips and wondered what it would take to get another drug-like inducing kiss. I was tempted to just steal it myself but we had all tomorrow to figure it out. I was just glad I had an excuse to touch her now. Now there were no more secrets. Well, not any misunderstandings about our feelings. Specifically mine. My point was that I was going to be touching her far fucking more, and I could only hope she was cool with it.

Maker, I prayed she was okay with it because I felt like a fucking addict after tasting her. I groaned putting my head down, wondering if I would actually get any damn sleep. Somehow, with the scent of cool wind and lilacs, I fell asleep within minutes.

Chapter 17

Maize

“You want me to sleep *where*, while my room is being repaired?” I tried to hide my grin, standing in the lounge staring at the closed-off area of where the hallway led to my room. A chest of my things including my bow having been packed and placed in the main room.

“In each of our rooms, you can switch off each night,” Zed concluded happily, as I leaned back slightly unsurprised to find Valerio there. The man had been rather attached to me since last night, and see if I minded - *I didn’t for the record.* In fact, not that I would admit it to him, but I was loving his touch.

I nibbled my lip and spoke openly, “I’m not sure if that is a good idea, I have really bad nightmares and sometimes night terrors.” Normal. I am so ridiculously normal. I promise.

“That’s okay, Maize,” Cannon offered me with a soft hand squeeze from where he lounged next to me, sitting on the chair I leaned on. The small smile on his lips made me feel far better than the conversation we had early that day. I shook my head trying to not think about that just yet. Besides, most of them seemed relieved I was back, and the only two people that seemed off were Charm, unsurprising, and Philip who just kept looking at me. I think I may have hurt his feelings, a lot. I just wasn’t sure if it was from leaving or something else.

“Philip, can I sleep in your room first then, just in case?” I asked, taking a risk and honestly expecting a bit of rejection, since he was acting off. Valerio nipped my shoulder slightly, and I tried to not smile at his low rumble of jealousy, but he didn’t say anything.

“Yeah?” Philip arched a brow as his eyes went from sad to lit up. I inhaled happily to see a bit of the Philip I met on the first day shining through.

“If you’re okay with that?” I asked softly, he winked at me, stood up from the couch walking forward. I shivered as he dipped his head and nipped my nose before walking towards his room. Why the heck was everyone biting me? Mind you it was very light, but hell, talk about turning a girl on. I know. I know. I’m weird.

“Bring whatever you need for tonight in here, sweetheart. You’re always welcome in my bed,” he said, chuckling as Chait shook his head, offering me a dry look. Maddox had his eyes narrowed at Philip’s room, and I could see his new overprotective streak shining through. Valerio, as mentioned, was being sort of cute and clingy. Despite being hesitant, I was really trying to start on a new foot and give this a chance. It wasn’t very hard to fall into rhythm with them. Cannon was reading through something near us as my hand drifted to his dark hair, a low rumble breaking through his throat at my touch.

Charm looked...Charm-ish. Except his gaze was focused on me, and I couldn’t tell if he wanted to say something or do something. I broke away from Valerio and grabbed a small group of clothes and walked towards Philip’s bedroom, placing them on a small night stand. I smiled because his room was like him, rich and luxurious looking. I rubbed the silk sheets with my finger as my center clenched at the idea of sleeping in his bed. For the record, I think I could have probably slept in the main room…but this was sort of fun.

A knock on the door sounded as I turned and looked at Charm. He spoke roughly, “Can I speak to you in my room?” *You know, for being named Charm…he wasn’t very good at being charming. Ha!* I sort of liked that about the odd bastard. He was still a bastard though.

Ah! Now that they couldn’t come bother me in my room, I would have to go room to room. This was going to be a lot of walking. Philip offered me a charming smile as I blushed and walked through the door, my arm suddenly in the firm grasp of Charm’s grip. I cursed as he entered a door that brought me into a room that was so not what I’d imagine his room to be like.

Everything was light and airy from the large windows to cream and gold bedding. Honestly, it reminded me a bit of a cloud and I looked up, spinning slightly, finding it downright beautiful the way the ceiling peaked and faded into a deep blue.

“This is beautiful,” I admitted and looked down to find the bastard sitting on the edge of the bed with his head tilted and indecision on his face.

“Why didn’t you tell me that we are your mates?” he asked softly, his eyes a dark hard amber.

I growled as I turned towards the door, “Seriously, Valerio?!”

“Sorry, baby,” he called, not sounding sorry in the least.

“Baby?” Cannon chuckled and then said ‘ow!’ as a smack over the head sounded throughout the main room. Honestly, it would have been funny if I hadn’t been so damn annoyed. At least I didn’t have to break the mate news…which actually took a lot of pressure off me. I had to admit I would have probably still put it off for some time.

Charm tugged my hand back so I was standing between his legs and looking at him, his hand dropping but hanging on his leg as if worried I’d try to get away.

“I didn’t want you all to know yet,” I admitted.

His jaw clenched, “If I had known--”

“You would have acted differently?” I arched a brow.

He grunted, “I felt like shit about how I treated you before finding out, but now I just feel awful, Maize. I don’t know how to say sorry without repeating it a million fucking times.”

“I’m not asking you to do that,” I stated softly. “Why does it bother you even more now?”

Charm’s eyes scanned mine as a slight vulnerability flashed there. “I grew up in the Demonic realm, my father is a prince in one of the kingdoms there. My mother was from the Light Fae Kingdom, unfortunately the two of them ended up being mates.”

“Why unfortunately?’ I asked softly.

“Because my mother was abusive as hell,” he admitted, “she used the mating bond to torture my father, essentially. I just saw how that shit killed my father, and I would never want to put someone through that agony, especially when that is the person that’s supposed to be protecting them and on their side.” My eyes widened. It was fascinating that he was worried about my reaction rather than assuming I would use it against him like how his mother did. I actually think that said way more about his character than he realized. I didn’t think it was time, but later…I needed to know what happened to that bitch.

“I would never do something like that,” I mumbled, “but Charm, I also, in some ways…despite you being an ass, am glad that I know it is real and not just how you think you had to act to be a good ‘mate.’ I mean sure we are sort of in a weird spot, and I don’t really know how to, you know, move past all this…but you apologized and I came back. I would say that’s a good start.”

He searched my face and inhaled, chuckling softly, “We are probably going to fight still, you drive me fucking crazy.”

My lip twitched and a thought popped in my head, “Let’s at least make it a positive outcome. Would you still be willing to train me?” See? Now that was a good attempt at trying right there. *Look at me go.…*

His eyes widened as he nodded, “Absolutely. Why now, though?”

I should just tell him. Closing my eyes I spoke, “I think I know who trashed my room because it was the same asshole who threatened me my second day here, and also hit me with a punch of magic on my way to the pub. I forget his name, or didn’t ask Alexander, but apparently he has some stupid political pull, and his uncle advises as an SE commander.”

“He did what?” Charm stood up and I squeaked, trying to step back, but his large arm wrapped around my waist. Before I could speak, he was doing his shit. “Valerio, did you hear this shit?”

After that, I didn’t even bother talking, to be honest. I think they were a bit crazy. Actually, I didn’t think, I knew. I watched quietly with interest as they began to argue on how to handle this. I heard the name David being thrown around a lot, so I was thinking that was either him or his uncle, that made sense to me. Quietly I pulled one of Charm’s blankets up and around my shoulders, climbing onto the bed. A small yawn slipped from my mouth as I felt a small pulse of happiness run through me. Despite their grumbling and anger, I was a bit happy to be around them. Not that I would admit it… yet.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Cannon demanded, looking very worked up.

“Well I got absolutely wasted and then…you know, left,” I mumbled as I blushed. It didn’t matter though because they went back to arguing. I stretched my hands above me and let out a content sound as Zed looked over at me with narrowed eyes, I smirked as he moved towards me.

“What did Alexander say about politics?” he asked softly, leaning over me. I let my fingers run over his soft shirt loving the texture under my fingers, before I realized I was being a total weirdo touching him so much. Oh well.

So I repeated that they had tried to get him in trouble, and apparently, it failed because of this uncle figure. Zed shook his head and spoke, “Well politics aren’t going to save him from his throat being ripped out.”

A small laugh bubbled out as he smirked, the others getting louder somehow.

Finally, I stood and walked out of the room, looking at the lowering sun. Once I pulled my hair into a messy bun, I slid on shoes. Philip was there then in my space with a confused and slightly panicked look.

"Where are you doing?" he asked quietly and quickly.

"Dinner," I responded calmly and then took the chance to reach forward to grab his hand like he had mine that first night, "want to come?"

I saw his worry disappear and he flashed that sexy smile, "I would love to come, sweetheart."

"Perv," I mumbled as the others walked in.

"You have no fucking idea," he muttered softly.

As we walked down the steps, I took my time, happy to be back, which wasn't something I had expected. I knew it had only been around a day, but you know, some places are just intrinsically comfortable for you. I think it was also about the people I was with. These men. It sure as heck wasn't the others here. I swallowed, trying to decide if I was going to give in fully to the mating bond, but as Philip squeezed my hand laughing at Zed's annoyance about something, I realized I already was. I think everyone else was starting to realize it as well. My lips pulled up, thinking about this morning leaving the bedroom.

I sat up and realized that I was literally surrounded by men. My men. My mates. My heart squeezed but not nearly as tight as the Chait and Valerio sandwich I was part of. Someone squeezed my ankle. I looked down to find a sleepy Zed, whose eyes were focused on me as he smoothed a thumb over my skin. I wiggled out from my captivity and crawled forward, looking down at him from where I was kneeling on the bed. The rest of the room was much the same, Maddox in the chair that Valerio had appeared in when I'd woken up, and Philip on one of the large couches in front of the fire while Cannon was on the other. Charm was laid out on the floor, his brow dipped as if in a bad dream.

"You okay?" Zed asked softly, grabbing my hand and bringing me back to him. His body was tense, his eyes continued to flicker across my form as I realized that I was literally wearing nothing except for a lace bra and panties. Oh well, I guess it was time to get comfortable, right?

I nodded and sighed, "I… I just want to get back."

"That shouldn't be a problem," he grinned.

Slipping from bed, I'd walked towards the bathroom right past Philip's sleeping form, feeling Zed's eyes on my ass…which was a pretty good

feeling. I wasn't positive why, but I didn't lock the door, stepping underneath the hot water, but keeping my hair out of it not really wanting to deal with how much of a mess it could be sometimes. Scrubbing my form, I hummed softly, feeling far better about the day as I stepped out into the bathroom realizing I hadn't brought extra clothes in, and I wasn't about to put back on my lace bra and underwear. I huffed, shaking my head as I pulled on a large plush robe and scowled at the dark hickey on my neck that Valerio left. Possessive much?

As I walked out of the room, I found several of them up, and I blushed not meeting their gazes as I slipped into the closet, laughter following me. I closed the door, thankful for how large it was. Honestly, I wasn't opposed to being naked…all together, but after everything that went on I was feeling a bit shy. I could admit that.

Sliding on a black pair of lace panties and a matching bra that gave the girls a little boost, my eyebrows shot up because I looked fantastic. I turned in the mirror and smiled happily as I walked back towards the rows of hanging pants available. I squeaked, turning as the door opened and Cannon's eyebrows went up, deep laughter exploding from the other room, his jaw clicking.

"Sorry, Maize," he growled looking over me with heat and then back to the room, "they told me you weren't in here, I just needed a shirt." Oh yes. He was shirtless. I could see the slight amusement in his eyes, so I motioned for him to come in as I plucked a larger unisex shirt from the drawer, it was as large as it would get. I turned and squeaked, finding him right in my space, looking over me with a smoldering heat that had my pulse beating fast, something his eyes tracked with curiosity. Sometimes, I really saw the predatorial side of him.

"Here," I thrust it into his chest as he chuckled softly, tugging on a strand of my hair before brushing his lips on my temple. Damn it. I must have made a sound because he looked down at me with a hot molten gaze and spoke softly.

"I'm glad we found you," he swallowed, his eyes darkening. "I knew you were upset, but I hadn't expected you to leave us."

"I left because," I nibbled my lip softly, "because I know I'm not a good enough mate, not even for one of you, let alone all of you. I promised I would give it a chance though."

Cannon let out a soft, low rumble and tilted my chin back, "You know I thought I was going crazy about this mate thing because I didn't think you felt it."

"Of course I did," I admitted softly, "I'm sorry for leaving. I should have said something."

"Don't leave again," he mumbled, his forehead pressing against mine. "If you ever feel the urge to leave, please tell me or someone, I can't live knowing you are somewhere in the world alone and possibly in danger."

"Cannon," I whispered, my eyes tearing up slightly.

"Later," he nodded as if he felt the overwhelming emotions flooding me right now. Then he shocked me as his lips brushed against mine, barely, before he was gone.

I'd gotten dressed, and I'd been so flushed that I hadn't even registered Alexa's surprise as all of them came down the stairs with me. I had thanked her, and she had seemed to catch on, her sons…not so much. Mikey had tried to give me a friendly hug and Maddox had yanked him away from me. That had been the moment when we decided it was time to leave for sure. Yeah, it had been a bit of a day, to say the least.

As we entered the dining hall, my eyes narrowed immediately on who I now realized was named David. Immediately, his gaze locked on to mine as he sneered, the other men sitting with them including the asshole that had cornered me…shit, he looked a bit rough. As in purple and blue. I honestly, didn't feel bad.

"I'm going to kill that kid," Zed stated softly as my lips twitched.

"To many witnesses right now," I offered quietly as Philip laughed.

As we rounded the table, I sat down once again between Cannon and Zed, the latter's arm on the back of my chair comfortably. My magic prickled as my familiars whispered against my ears and my wings fluttered to come out. Which of course meant something was up. It had nothing to do with me being turned on either, although if I focused on the men around me for more than a second, I was sure that could change. I followed the room and found David's eyes again, not even bothering to look away from me, his look filled with warning. My patience was running thin with this guy, and I would have rather he just said something or did something instead of this weird staring contest. *And I got my wish.*

An odd wave of power brushed over me, making me feel dizzy as I realized that there was something moving through the room. I swallowed,

gripping the table and realized that no one else was being affected by it. I let out a small pained sound, feeling as though I was being crushed by my own wings. I gasped as I felt a hand on me as I curled over trying to draw in a solid breath. Something crashed in the room and I realized something was very wrong. Far more wrong than I'd thought.

I whimpered as a pair of arms echoing the individual's demonic magic wrapped around me, attempting to fight against the odd dark spell washing over me and trying to pull me under. I inhaled, realizing it was Charm, my wings tightening as I tried to protect myself, not from him but from whatever was attacking me. I could practically feel my face turning blue from the lack of air as my vision dotted, his grip on my jaw making me look up at him. I heard a roar somewhere else in the room as yelling broke out.

"Fuck," Charm snarled and I felt his magic work its way under my wings and I finally gasped, feeling the build-up of my magic trying to work its way out. I tried to warn him but it was soundless and too late, my wings blasting out, their moveable material coasting through Charm as my magic did what it fuking did best…

Poisoned.

Shit. Panic hit me, the dark bullshit power releasing. As I crawled forward, Charm's face paled slightly as green and blue sparks colored his skin like mini electric currents. I whimpered as I gripped his face gently. I hated what I was about to do. I wasn't about to ask him, I couldn't lose one of my mates, that wasn't a fucking question. It was more than that though. I didn't want to lose Charm. Sure, he was a jerk…but he was possibly my jerk. I couldn't lose him. Who was going to train me? Hell, I hope he had been serious about that mate thing because he was not about to have a fucking choice in the matter. I let my magic take over completely and my teeth hurt as my wings created a ward like bubble, sparks of purple and pink, around us two as my teeth elongated slightly.

"I'm so sorry," I winced as his body started to shake slightly, his magic fighting against the poison, but I knew it wouldn't be enough.

I didn't even go for a clean bite, my teeth slicing the skin straight through to his pulse as I began to draw the poison out. He growled his hands tightened on my waist after a moment as I continued to take him in. I could taste the toxicity my magic exuded in his blood and I easily pulled at it. Except…something happened that never had before. The connection, which was usually one way, me locking him to my magic turned into

something larger. His magic slowly began to trickle through my system as the two created an interlocking pattern where the pull was equal. I gasped as the last of the toxic magic was pulled out and the bonds seemed to snap, causing me to yank back.

Before I could get a fucking breath, my bloody lips were being seared by Charm as a dangerous rumble went through his chest, rolling us so that I was trapped underneath him. I could feel the demon underneath his skin, and I moaned into his sweet lethal taste as he tightened his hold on my hair, forcing me to open myself up to him completely. When he pulled back looking a bit wild, I realized both of us were covered in blood… except his wound was nearly healed and in its place was a dark butterfly set of wings that looked almost skeletal of nature.

Shit. I marked him.

His nose ran along my collarbone and my eyes shot down to a small star that rested there… what the hell was even going on right now? I stared into Charm's eyes and I felt our connection light up, but it was different, as I said. I felt attached, and I had no idea what would happen if we tried to leave one another, but it was more than that. I could feel his emotions. I could feel his lust. It didn't feel forced, it felt like a mating bond, like I'd given into my magic when I'd chosen to heal him… Ah, shit.

"Did you just form a fucking mating bond?" a voice demanded softly.

"Yep," I swallowed nervously, shaking slightly as Charm examined my face intensely, any cocky attitude long gone. Instead, he looked…intense.

"I didn't want you to die," I admitted softly.

His head nodded as he pressed his forehead to my neck. I met the gaze of those above us, mainly Chait's as his eyes tried to shield something from me. I didn't want that. I needed to know what the hell was going on with him. It seems that I had a lot to figure out. Like what the fuck was happening right now? Closing my eyes, I told myself I would figure it out in just a minute. That was when the world went black.

Chapter 18

Maize

“The magic he used was nearly archaic, Valerio. Her own magic was forced to turn against her. I have no goddamn idea how he even got a hold of a spell like that.” Those were the first words I’d heard as consciousness rolled over me, and my brain sped to catch me up to what was going on. I couldn’t hear the response, and I realized that the voices were outside of the room I was in, lying on a very comfortable bed that was convincing me to not really care who the heck was talking and about what. I knew it was important though. I could hear the panic in my mates’ voices.

Warm light filtered in from the mostly closed door, and I blinked, looking around the lightly designed room that was bathed in night-time darkness. The fireplace emitting a warm glow from the dying fire. My throat felt raw as I swallowed, but my energy? My magic? It felt fluid and released. Free. It could feel the stronger control I seemed to have on it. I felt power rushing through me like never before, making me nearly lose my breath in the process. It was like I was somehow more powerful than ever before. Then the panic hit me realizing why exactly I felt so good.

I had literally taken in one of my mate’s blood and formed a weird mating bond while trying to save his life.

Well, hell.

“Shit,” I mumbled and jumped as the bed shifted, causing me to snap my head around and come nose to nose with Charm.

“Charm,” I offered a strangled sound, “I am so fucking sorry.” Before he could say a word, I was on his lap as he grunted, and I buried my head against his neck, wrapping around him like a monkey, “I’m so fucking sorry. I didn’t want this for you. I know you didn’t want this. I know we have a weird as hell relationship or friendship, whatever the heck this is, but I didn’t want you to die either.”

“Maize.” He cut off my rambling by grabbing my jaw to stop me from freaking out even more. I wanted to punch him for doing that, but I’d done so much already, my eyes flickered to the tattoo on his neck…my tattoo. My mark. I was already possessive over that. What the hell was wrong with me?

“Maize,” he demanded again, and I realized I’d been off in my own head freaking out.

“What?” I swallowed, feeling suddenly defensive. I really tried to focus on the man himself. My mind had other plans, though. No matter how I tried, I couldn’t stop thinking about how his large hands felt on my hips or how hard he was, the proof pressed against my heated center?

Instead, I looked over his golden skin and chiseled jaw. I studied his amber-colored eyes and the way his pupils were expanded at whatever he saw in my face. I let out a slow breath and waited for him to say something. *Anything*.

His hands gripped my jaw tighter and tilted my head back so all I could focus on was him. “Let me make myself clear, Maize. I was very aware of the risk I was taking. I had also seen that type of magic used before. It was worth the risk because you’re alive.”

I felt tears fill my eyes as they dripped down my cheeks. “But I connected you to me, you can’t ever leave me, you and I both will be in pain because of it.” I grimaced hating that. I knew how this went, and I had no idea how to proceed from here.

When I was only 15, I had been training with one of the boys from the village outside of the castle. He had been my age, and while I wasn’t supposed to leave the castle walls, Jamie always helped keep my secret. He helped me try out magic that even the Obsidian Butterflies were afraid to practice. Except, in true Maize fashion, my magic had lashed out, and I had poisoned him.

Unfortunately there had been a terrible mishap in saving him because he had grown attached. So much that he wouldn’t let me go to the castle, and when I insisted that I would have to, he followed until the guards separated us.

He had ended up hitting his head into a stone wall trying to get into the castle. He was in such excruciating pain being away from me. I had felt like crap, but not like that. Not that extreme. Unsurprisingly, he had ended up dead from head trauma.

As you can imagine, I was terrified as hell right now.

“We bonded as mates,” he whispered softly, his eyes filling with light, “and I’m not sure I would want to leave, Maize. I think you and I are both in deep on this one.”

I swallowed because he was right. I knew he was, but gods, this had not been what I expected at all. “At least I can never hurt you again, you should be immune to it.”

He smirked. “So you don’t need to worry about your control around me anymore?”

I narrowed my eyes, smiling. “You *would* take it that way.”

“I can be positive, Maize.” He winked and ran a thumb along my bottom lip. I swallowed as I took a chance and leaned forward pressing my lips to his. Immediately, he deepened it, and I sighed, thrilled to be able to touch him. To taste him. My magic didn’t even tense up, laying around with his magic as if it was thrilled that he was ‘ours.’

“I see we are getting along here,” Valerio’s voice softened, and I jumped, turning to find him in the doorway.

“Something like that,” I mumbled, moving off him slightly. Well, tried to, but of course, Charm being an ass didn’t let me go far. I relaxed back into him as Valerio sat down on the bed, grabbing my hand and looking at me cautiously.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, his voice oddly clinical and calming. I did a bit of a mental run-through on my body and was relieved to know all fingers and toes were accounted for, metaphorically and physically.

“Not terrible,” I mumbled as my head pulsed, “alright my head hurts. What the hell did that asshole do?” Because I knew it was that David kid.

“Used magic he shouldn’t have had access to.” Charm shook his head, frowning.

“Is he…” I hedged.

“Not dead,” Valerio’s jaw clenched as he shook his head, “he used a portaling spell before I could get my hands on him, I was more focused on you as it was. We’ll find him though, the castle has already been alerted and his uncle is in questioning.”

I sighed, “It’s not just him, you know, or his friends. I am always going to have this issue, I am always going to be causing problems because of who I am.”

“The Horde is changing, birdy,” Charm mumbled, kissing my shoulder in a sweet action that had me blushing along with the nickname. “If they don’t want to change, they can get the fuck out.” *That was better*.

“Maize?” Zed’s concerned voice traveled over from the doorway, and I looked up at him offering a small smile. I slipped from the bed and walked

up to him, my bare feet cold on the stone floors. The other two were talking quietly behind me as the purple-eyed man wrapped a hand around the back of my neck, bringing me close to his chest. I sighed into it and found myself inhaling his scent.

“I’m really glad you're alright,” he mumbled and then chuckled, pulling back. I arched a brow as he ran a thumb over my bottom lip. “Didn’t know you had fangs, angel.”

I smirked and nipped the thumb on my bottom lip, my fangs much smaller but still there. My eyes widened as I pricked his skin and a heated smoky scent swirled around me as his blood melted in my mouth. Zed had me up against the wall, his head dipped before I could say anything as I watched his eyes turn into those liquid obsidian pools.

“Dangerous, Maize,” he warned. “I may end up biting back.”

Tilting my head back I offered a small smile, and my eyes flickered down to his lips. I heard Valerio say something in warning, but before anyone could stop him, Zed’s icy cold magic surrounded me as he took control of our kiss. I inhaled sharply, breathing in his expensive scent as my tongue pressed into his mouth, his groan only emphasizing how hard he was against me. Pulling back, Zed nipped my bottom lip and my center exploded with heat as he muttered my name sounding pained…all before he was pulled away from me.

“Damn it, get off me,” Zed growled at Valerio who was looking frustrated. Charm was just watching me with a heated expression.

“I can’t handle seeing that right now without losing my shit.” The normally controlled man muttered as Zed rolled his eyes, winked at me and sauntered out the door. Valerio following. Damn them. I walked back towards Charm who motioned for me to join him back in the bed. To be honest, I didn’t even fight it. I was exhausted.

“I’m going to go shower real quick,” Charm yawned, looking far more relaxed than normal. His hair was messy and I wanted to run my finger over his eyebrow scar. Damn this was dangerous.

“Mkay,” I nodded as he chuckled. My eyes closed and I curled under the sheets. My familiars were oddly quiet and they seemed to be sleeping, equally as exhausted as I was. When the bed shifted, I opened my eyes to find Cannon and Maddox both looking at me with curiosity.

“You look exhausted,” Cannon frowned, sitting to run a hand through my hair as I heard the shower turn on in the other room. Yeah, I totally

wasn’t thinking about him in the shower…I promise.

“I hope I can sleep without having nightmares tonight,” I mumbled softly.

Maddox spoke, “Do you want Philip to come in here?”

“Not if he’s already relaxed,” I pointed out quietly.

“I don’t mind!” Philip called from outside as I laughed, Maddox and Cannon shaking their heads at his clear eavesdropping.

“Teacup,” Maddox captured my attention, “since you are staying… which you are, for sure.”

I grinned at his narrowed eyes. “I think you should consider the teaching thing I mentioned, you could shadow either of us.”

I tilted my head and inhaled. “I don’t want to mess up your classes.”

“You would be making them far more interesting,” Cannon commented under his breath.

“Maybe,” I considered, “let me get some sleep before I go around making big decisions though, I feel freakin’ drunk with how tired I am.” I grinned as Maddox went to no doubt quip back, but the door opened and Chait peaked in. Immediately I remembered the shadow in his gaze from earlier.

“Can we talk, *mon amour*?” he asked softly. My love? I blushed as both Cannon and Maddox left, the latter grabbing Chait’s shoulder in a comforting way on the way out. What the heck was that, man? Now I was nervous as hell.

“You're making me anxious,” I admitted softly as his eyes widened.

“I am not meaning to,” he stated with a head tilt and frown.

“I know,” I mumbled, “but you seem super serious like you're not saying something…it’s making me nervous.” Wow. Way to be honest. Let’s just throw our feelings out there like we are totally tough enough to deal with rejection, Maize.

“I *am* not saying something,” he admitted, sitting close to me and grabbing my hands, examining my face with his bright eyes.

“Well, what is it?” I asked quietly.

That smoky hazy power wrapped around me, and before I could get a response, my eyes closed and his lips pressed to mine in a soft easy movement. His silver piercing was cold against my lips in contrast to his sensual mouth. My entire body seemed to be heating into a burning temperature. I leaned forward as my hands finally went through his hair,

and he tugged me onto his lap, my form easily straddling him as I fit against him almost perfectly. Almost as if I was meant to be in his arms.

“Those weren’t words,” I whimpered, almost moaning as he pulled back.

He flashed me a grin, “No, they weren’t. I just couldn’t go another moment without tasting you.”

Well, who was I to say no to that?

His face went serious again as he examined my expression before he tugged up his sleeves, making me realize I’d never actually seen his wrists before.

And now I knew why. Immediately, I had his large arm in my hands as I hesitantly smoothed over a very familiar set of brands and burns on his wrist, causing the skin to darken.

“Who did this?” I snarled, feeling furious.

He offered me a small sad smile and moved onto the bed, shifting us so that he was caging me from above, his lips trailing my cheekbones as he spoke quietly.

“I was kept in a cage most of my life, my parents had sold me off to an owner when I was around five and I was kept in iron until I finally escaped around ten. I only made it to the Horde because I found a group of older kids that were trying to leave as well, they’d stolen enough money to get us a portal out of there.” He explained as I went frozen, trying to imagine him in a cage…and I felt fury roll through me.

“Chait,” I whispered, feeling my voice catch.

He shook his head and kissed my nose, “I don’t want you to get upset, *mon amour*. I am telling you because my entire life I have known what it was like to be trapped and hurt by those that are supposed to love you. For so long, I was hesitant to even trust my team let alone anyone else…then you came along.”

“Me?” I asked like a dumb twit, clearly.

He smiled, kissing my lips softly, “Yeah you, Maize. I tried to keep my distance from you for so long, but I feel like I’ve just wasted time now. I need you to know how I feel about you because I can tell everything is about to change.”

Yeah, I felt that way as well. It was terrifying.

“And how do you feel?” I asked nervously, really hoping this wasn’t going to go to shit.

His eyes lightened into almost a bubble gum pink. “I feel like I love you, Maize. I feel like I’ve been in love with you for several months now probably--”

And I had yanked him down and seared my lips to him as explosive heat and affection seared my chest. Holy crap. Chait loved me? I had never heard such meaningful and honest words come from someone, and my eyes stung as tears wet my cheeks between us, both of us pulling away as he offered me a heated dark look.

“Listen I know you probably don’t feel--”

“I do,” I swallowed nervously, “I really do. I love you, Chait. Like a ridiculous amount. I didn’t know at first what this was, but I do now. I love you. I trust you so much and you’ve never given up on me, in fact, you’ve probably let me get away with too much, but you and Maddox. You both changed my life in the best way possible when I met you a year ago. Even when you pull me away from fun Christmas parties.” I smirked with the memory.

He offered me a massive smile, “Yeah well, you shouldn’t be at parties while healing.”

I ran a hand over his jaw, “Maybe I had just wanted to see you.”

His ears heated as he pressed his lips to mine again, whispering that he loved me as a warm smoky haze took over me. I surrendered to the feeling of it. The emotions I felt for him were like a wave that had been growing then suddenly crashed over me. All of these realizations and feelings made me aware that there was someone else I needed to talk to alone because I hadn’t been lying; they had changed my life. And I loved it.

“Oh come on,” Charm growled, “not in my bed.”

Chait barked out a laugh rolling up. “Sorry, Charm.”

I sat up looking over the shirtless, sort of jerky, and sort of cute bastard that grumbled and walked over to the other side of the bed. Philip appeared in the door as Chait pressed a kiss to my nose sweetly before leaving, making me sigh like a total twit.

“I’m sleeping in here also,” Philip announced as Charm muttered a curse, but once I snuggled up to him he went quiet…that’s what I thought.

As Philip wrapped his arms around me, and I became encompassed between the two of them, I realized tomorrow would be the start of something new. I didn’t know what, but I thought I was ready for it. Ready

to find myself and my place here. Ready for them and whatever being mates meant. Why?

Because suddenly, I didn’t feel so lost in Fae.

M. Sinclair

International & US Best Seller

M. Sinclair is a Chicago native, parent to 3 cats, and can be found writing almost every moment of the day. Despite being new to publishing, M. Sinclair has been writing for nearly 10 years now. Currently, in love with the Reverse Harem genre, she plans to publish an array of works that are considered romance, suspense, and horror within the year. M. Sinclair lives by the notion that there is enough room for all types of heroines in this world and being saved is as important as saving others. If you love fantasy romance, obsessive possessive alpha males, and tough FMCs, then M. Sinclair is for you!

Just remember to love cats... that's not negotiable.

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